

杉井 光
イラスト※岸田メル

神様のメモ帳

3 0 8

NEET探偵事務所

It's the only NEET thing to do.

神様のメモ帳

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ミンさん

ニート探偵事務所があるビルの1階に店を構えるラーメンはなまる店主。アリスはじめニート探偵団の面々を生温かい目で見守っている。



篠崎彩夏

ナルミのクラスメイト。とある事件で重傷を負い、記憶を失ったものの生還を果たす。明るく素直な性格だが、どこかずれてるところも。

平坂

Hirasaka-gumi

組

いまどき任侠を気取る不良少年グループ。しかしその実力は侮れない。



四代目

平坂組リーダー。冷徹な性格だが、趣味特技が手芸という隠れた一面も。ナルミと義兄弟の杯を交わしている。

電柱

平坂組、四代目麾下のツートップその1。組の中では縦幅最大。

岩男

平坂組、四代目麾下のツートップその2。組の中では横幅最大。

アリス Alice ス

ひきこもりの自称《ニート探偵》。PCとぬいぐるみで溢れた自室で、ネットを駆使して真実を暴きだす。普段はいつもパジャマを着て、栄養の大半をドクターベーパーから摂取している。



藤島海

Narumi 鳴

本作の主人公。転校を繰り返して人付き合いを避けるようになっていたが、とある事件をきっかけにアリスの助手となる。なにことにもやる気がなさげなニート予備軍だが、口八丁だけは一人前。

ニート探偵

NEET Detectives

アリスのもとで合法・非合法を問わず捜索活動をするニートな野郎ども。

団



テツ先輩

元ボクサーで荒事にたけた武闘派。その一方、パチスロや競馬などに精を出すギャンブル狂。



ヒロさん

女のもとを渡り歩くヒモ。卓越した話術でたくみに情報を引き出す（ただし対女子限定）。



少佐

童顔で小学生にも見えかねない外見をしているが、盗聴・盗撮・爆発物のエキスパート。





NEET ニート探偵 アリス ALICE
DETECTIVE

C R E D I T S

Heaven's Memo Pad (神様のメモ帳) - Volume 09 by Hikaru Sugii (杉井 光).

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SYNOPSIS

"I am not an ordinary detective, but a NEET detective. Searching the whole world to locate the words of the dead."

The NEET Detective leading the NEETs who gathered in the dark alley— Alice said that.

The perplexing incident that Ayaka and I were wound into during the winter of my first year at high school, and also the malicious drug 'Angel Fix' that corroded the city, the mystery was unraveled by the detective girl Alice who doesn't take even one step out of her room.

"Knowing the truth might destroy the tranquil life of your past, do you wish to know even so?"

Because of my answer, the NEETs who usually do nothing were mobilized to solve the case!

"I can probably die now," said Ender. "All my life's work is done."

"Mine too," said Novinha. "But I think that means that it's time to start to live."

— *Orson Scott Card -- Speaker of the Dead.*

CHAPTER ONE

Till this day, I still vividly remember the day mom died.

Every word my sister said on the phone, dad's drool in his half-opened mouth, the instruction posters pasted on the white hospital walls--I still remember them all. These were all too bright that I wondered if I mistook them for being in a movie or some other places. But looking back at my memories, I realized it could be associated with the last time I saw off mom at the door in the morning. There is no doubt this is my memory. I wondered why I could still remember that so vividly.

I supposed it was because I did not see the corpse for myself, and the makeborn up for the surrealism, my mind frantically pieced together everything I saw and heard in my mind. I was still in elementary school when mom's body was knocked down by a trailer, and deformed as she was crushed between it and the building wall, so obviously, dad didn't allow me into the morgue.

Dad himself could not move as he stood in front of the stairs leading to the basement, so my sister was the one who identified the corpse. Back then, she was still in high school, but she did everything, from speaking to the police and doctors, and calling for the funerary parlor.

Dad became weird after that, as though his fractured bones were put back in the wrong places. I did not remember exactly what happened at the funeral, but I knew that he did not say anything. Perhaps that was when he snapped. The next day, he started calling my sister by my mom's name. I could not understand what happened at all. It seemed sister knew, but did not know how to respond.

"Maybe I'm too capable."

While we were alone together, sister shrugged as she said this.

"Dad's someone who can't live on without mom. He probably escaped to the past, pretending that Alice didn't die."

I didn't know how she could calmly rationalize this.

However, sister's deduction was amazingly accurate. After observing dad, who had lost it, for a little while, I had to come to agree with that assessment. Dad's mind was back to when he first got married with mom, and because of that, he saw the only female in the house--his own daughter--as his wife. Also, he would say such passionate things like "Sorry for always having world." or "I might be deployed to Kansai next time. Sorry to bother you." For a while, I couldn't believe that my stoic dad actually became like that, and to be honest, it felt really disgusting. Also, he could not recognize me anymore. His mind 'went back' to when he got married with mom, back when she had yet to bear a kid. For dad, I'm someone who shouldn't exist. I didn't know how to deal with dad when he was like this, and to be honest, it was easier for me not to interact with him. There was not much change to this daily life. Dad continued to work, earning money for the family. While things would get awkward whenever the school called (whenever the teacher called, he would say something like 'that's strange. I don't have a son'), but sister could normally handle that well. Since it was not a hassle to any of us, we did not care no matter how mentally disturbed he was.

After a long while, I asked sister,

"Sister...are you really alright?"

"Eh, well...about mom's death."

My sister chuckled. Her past experiences gave birth to such a smile.

"Of course I'm not. But neither you nor dad are able to help,

Narumi. I got no choice but to shoulder the load."

No choice.

Just as dad remained mentally disturbed, I too could only stand by the side, watching. Sister did all she could to protect our lives in a realistic sense.

"It's stupid."

She sighed.

"Humans can't revive. Can't he just cry it all out and forget?"

Those words appear to be directed at me as well. To be honest, I really had the same thoughts as dad--as long as I did not admit that mom died, maybe I could have waived off the past? Maybe sister saw through me, and that I didn't have the guts to be 'broken mentally', unwilling to say it out.

The dead can't revive.

I held my breath, enduring this youth filled with simple yet cruel truth.

When I was in my 10th grade, dad bought a house in Tokyo. He was dispatched to the main office in Tokyo, and did not have to wander everywhere.

Because of that, I too came to this city, encountering many lives and deaths, sometimes causing commotion, sometimes getting hurt, sometimes dirtying myself, soiling my face with dirt as I remembered it all, welcoming this second Spring. In the process of recording every memo in a story, I learned something--no matter who the narrator was, what they said formed their story. I might not be the one bleeding, but if the truth was as I heard and witnessed, turned into words with my own hands, what I write would be my story. On the other hand, I could only recount the stories I heard and saw, what were related to me. All I could de-

scribe were the stories of those who were similarly suffering, anguished, and contorted like me.

Finally, I could say it.

The final case of the detective who shut herself in the frigid room.

The cruel battle of the girl who like me, wanted to revive her dead mother.

Why did she not choose that one smart move? What kind of grass would the land grow after absorbing so much blood, such that one would laugh for, shed tears for, break themselves for, be forgotten? What kind of flowers would bloom--

The me now probably had a right to say this story.

For I lost Alice again.

✱

First day of Spring Break, we held an important meeting at the back of Hanamaru Ramen Shop.

This meeting was organized by Tetsu-senpai. Like usual, he's dressed in a short-sleeved T-shirt, his arms folded, emphasizing the biceps that were trained over a long time. Tagging along was Major, who as usual, was wearing a camouflage patterned helmet and a jacket on his small body that's like an elementary school kid. Also, there's Hiro-san, looking like a star as he wore the classy pink jacket representing the Sakura season. He was like a youth representing the fragrant spring breeze, but was a pretty face who lived on scamming women. Last of all, there's me.

"...So the topic of this evaluation meeting is--"

Tetsu-senpai scowled hard, and said,

"Why is it that Narumi's able to avoid repeating the year."

"How about you do a proper celebration for me!?"

I slammed the wooden desk that acted as our table.

"What are you saying now, Vice Admiral Fujishima?" Major looked a little surprised, sighing as he shook his head, "You don't look like you have a sense of danger. Now there's only one more chance to repeat the year."

"What kind of chance is that!?"

With much peril, I managed to glide past my second year end of semester tests held in early March, salvaged my dire failing grades with retests and remedial, and was finally able to enjoy Spring vacation without a care, so I came to Hanamaru Ramen Shop to report the good news, only for everything to turn out this way. Major was so furious, his shoulders were huffing, and he lashed out at me,

"You never repeated in high school. What kind of NEET are you!?"

"Didn't you graduate from high school straight away, Major? And you entered the school that only the smart ones enter."

"But I never understood how wonderful this world is before I entered college..."

Major looked far away as he said this. Right, I just had a thought. What did this person do to fall so far from the elites?

"You want to know?" Major asked as his eyebrows twitched.

Only those that desire to say something really unbelievable would ask such a line, no exceptions. Without waiting for my reply, he continued on,

“The opportunity that allowed me the chance to enter the world of NEETs was a book. It affected the philosophies of many thinkers and literary experts, a book every man should read.”

“Really? What book is it? Just get straight to the point already.”

“The path of knowing death--” Major's goggles lens sparkled, and he said, “'Bushido'.^[1]”

“Are you going to say that the author's name is Inazou Nitobe?”

“Don't ruin the punchline now, okay!?”

Stop being so proud of such a lousy punchline.

“Samurai and NEET have nothing to do with each other. Of course I know where the punchline's coming from.”

“Oh? Vice Admiral Fujishima. I guess you read 'Bushido' since you're saying this now?”

The sharp stare made me struggle with my reply,

“Eh...I never read it...”

“Of course, I didn't read it either.” “So you didn't read it either!” The only ones who can ask such questions are the ones who read it!

Hiro-san overheard our bickering, and answered in Major's stead,

"Some time back, Alice had Tetsu and me investigate a stalker. The peeping cameras that guy used was of an incredibly high quality, and couldn't be found in the market. We finally managed to track it down to a certain college student."

"What's with that face, Vice Admiral Fujishima? Are you thinking this Major Mukai Hitoshi is a stalker?"

"Eh...ah, no, that's not what happened? I thought the conversation would end up like that."

"I was a victim too!" Major lashed out, "The culprit was a student in the same faculty as me. He used my prototypes without my permission."

Thus, Major was distrustful of college, and at the same time, Alice and the others witnessed his skills, interacted with him, and integrated him into the backyard of Ramen Hanamaru.

"For us NEETs, just graduating from high school is a shame. Moreso ever, I ended up in a national college. I want to surpass Tetsu and Hiro, be a full-fledged NEET, and repeat my years in college!"

"I didn't enter high school anymore. Better than Tetsu who met a pretty female teacher and had to undergo her tutelage."

"No, you got so many licenses that are helpful with work, Hiro. My rank as a NEET should be higher."

"I do nothing other than to leech money off women. Thus I'm more of a NEET."

"I do nothing other than fighting and gambling. I'm the King NEET here!"

What are you guys competing over?

"Alice never attended school though. We're lightweights compared to her."

Major's words left everyone silent.

I had been curious about this all this time, but I never found

the opportunity to speak up. It's a stupid topic, but it might be the perfect time to ask. I checked the expressions of the trio, and spoke up,

"So...why did Alice become a NEET detective?"

Tetsu-senpai and Major looked around, and then, they looked over at Hiro.

"I don't know either."

Hiro grimaced.

"It's true that Master Gorou entrusted Alice to me, but..."

Shionji Gorou--Alice's great uncle, and the master to Hiro's gigolo antics. He had quite some history with me, but even he never discussed about Alice's past with me. I guess Hiro knew as much as I did, that the Shionjis were a conglomerate, and due to some complicated reasons, Alice left home. End of story.

"Maybe she'll tell you if you ask her now, Narumi."

Hiro gave a vague looking smile.

"No, it's fine. I'm just a little curious. It's not a good thing to ask her without reason..."

"Just ask her how to be a perfect NEET, and then ask the question."

Tetsu-senpai redirected us back to this topic.

"That's right, Vice Admiral Fujishima. This is your last chance before you graduate from high school."

"Alright everyone, let's discuss the matter on 'how to submit a school withdrawal slip as coolly as possible'. Hiro's eyes were glowing.

"I knew this would happen, so I developed a fully-automatic school withdrawal slip shooting machine. 60 rounds in 1 second!" Saying that, Major took out a device resembling a miniature printer. Seriously, I had no idea what's the purpose of developing such a thing.

"Relying on machines? That's a second-rate move. I'll show you the secret, first-class style of submitting it."

Tetsu-senpai said as he gave me a serious look.

"Hold the form down on the teacher's head, and deliver a few punches. That'll deal quite a bit of damage."

"Because you beat up the teacher!" That has nothing to do with withdrawing from school!

"So just submit the school withdrawal form along with the marriage certificate request."

Hiro came up with another ridiculous idea. A marriage certificate request?

"But this can only one on female teachers who aren't married. 'Since the student-teacher relationship is stopping us, I won't be attending school'. Once you say that, surely she will accept it with tears of joy."

"Surely not." Even without that arduous process, the teacher will accept the form. Eh, but I have no intention to drop out of school though?

"Ah wait, Hiro. Being unmarried is a key to being a NEET. If you get married after dropping out, that defeats the purpose, doesn't it?"

Tetsu-senpai's opinion was straight to the point. But to be honest, this discussion's too ridiculous to be called defeating the purpose. Hiro merely shrugged at this predicament he expected,

"No biggie. I can simply not submit the request to the marriage council."

"As to be expected of you, Hiro! I heard you collected hundreds of women's signatures on these certificates, right?" "Aren't those incriminating evidence? Why didn't you get rid of them?" Tetsu-senpai asked.

"Oi oi, that's cruel of you, Hiro. Discarding them is a show of dishonesty to women."

"You're never honest to begin with! Anyway, isn't this a marriage scam?"

"It's not a scam, but a fantasy granted to people. You have taught me that, no, Narumi-kun?"

"I didn't, stop fabricating this!"

"To deal with this, my device's able to switch into an auto-firing marriage certificates mode!"

So I say, what's the point of that?

Hiro activated it out of curiosity, and it rattled and fired off a bunch of papers. The marriage certificates fluttered at the door of the ramen shop like snowflakes.

And the door opened,

"Yo Narumi, bring this bowl to Alice--"

Hiro hurriedly stopped it, but it was too late. The marriage certificates land right on Min-san's face, just as she was holding the bowl in her hands. She had a look, and went beetroot.

"If you want to purpose, do it right!"

She beat Hiro up, and retreated to the kitchen. All that was left

was the bowl of miso ramen with char siu and corn, without ramen (it should have been called miso soup instead).

"Hm? You want to know about my background?"

Alice, eating the beansprouts, spring onions, and dousing them with Dr. Pepper, questioned me. The temperature of the air-conditioning in the NEET detective agency was a migraine-inducing freezing. She was seated on the bed inside, with the ill-looking lights of the many monitors shining upon her. Once again, our detective's living unhealthily.

"Hm, well, I can't say that I'm not interested at all.."

Shionji Yuuko, commonly known as Alice. My employer, a hikikomori of a detective. Pale skin, dressed in thin pajamas, her slender legs exposed, as though she was not exposed to the cold. How in the world does she live in such an environment? What kind of growing up did she have to have such a strange quirk?

"So why are you only asking me this now? You have been my assistant for a year and a half, haven't you?"

Alice tilted her head, showing some confusion.

A year and a half...?

While realizing how fast time passed, I lamented how short the time was. The conflicting thoughts occupied half of my mind. While Alice should have aged as long as I did, her physical shape showed nary a change.

"I've been curious. Like, what did you do before being a detective, how old you are...eh, of course, there has to be some reason, so I didn't dare to ask."

"I don't know how old I am either."

"...Huh?"

"No matter how intelligent I am, there are periods in my infancy that I do not remember. I do not remember the moment I was born, so I do not know my birthday and age."

For a moment, I was flabbergasted.

"...No, but, well, your parents would have told you, right?"

"So I said, my family situation isn't like that."

Alice said with a self-reproaching tone,

"I was born to the Shionjis, one who 'should not be born', so ever since young, I was locked in a room, and the servants did the cleaning. I never met my parents before."

I was left speechless. What was more chilling was the nonchalance in Alice's tone.

"In the family, the only ones who interacted with me were either great uncle Gorou, or the other children. For example, there's my sister, cousins. Once a week at most. Well, the doctor does drop by every day though. Needless to say, I never had a birthday before, and never went through kindergarten or school. Think about it, do you think I do have a chance to know of my own birthday?"

Someone who should not be born--the words continued to echo in my mind. I cursed my foolish self for accidentally peeking into the abyss of a girl's heart.

"If this isn't enough to satisfy your curiosity, do you need me to go into the specifics?"

Alice said impishly. With a frozen face, I shook my head.

"No, sorry. It's my fault."

"Why apologize? I don't mind. It's simply because you never

asked that I never said."

Alice shrugged."

"There's no reason to hide these facts, and I don't think of my predicament as unfortunate. I do feel grateful, fortunate to some extent even. I won't be shackled by all the things of the world, and simply focus on living a life dedicated to absorbing knowledge."

After hearing those words, I was left more speechless than before.

Certainly she was not lacking in food and clothing, and she was not exactly abused in any case. She might not have any freedom to leave home, but with the internet present, Alice had no need to. She might even scorn upon the concept of familial love and warmth.

"Also, I have been blaming everything on my family circumstances till this point. But I do know that my age isn't something I can just investigate. Basically, I do not have any interest in those thoughts. I do have a vested interest in the person 'Shionji Yuuko', but everything about 'when was she born', and 'how long has she lived' remains as unimportant information to me. Do you agree?"

"Yes...?"

With her mentioning this, I suddenly realized that age wasn't exactly such an important information.

"But without knowing your birthday and age, there will be many issues unbeknownst to you too, right?"

"How so?" Alice raised her chopsticks? "My bank account and credit cards were handled while I was still with the Shionjis. There is no need for any personal particulars until then. I have no affiliation with school or licenses after all."

Since she said so, it probably was the case.

"No, well, what if you need to handle procedures at some government agency?"

"Government agency? Why do I need to go to such a place--"

Saying that, Alice placed the chopsticks back onto the tray. At this moment, she noticed the existence of a certain thing.

There was a piece of paper pressed beneath the bowl. It was the marriage certificate Hiro fired with the device. It seemed I had served it along with the bowl, without noticing. Alice took it out, had a glance, and immediately went beetroot.

"Wh-wh-what is this!?"

"Ahh, this is, well just now--"

"And I was wondering why you're so curious about my age out of a sudden. So-so-so this is what you mean!?"

"Ah? No, not at all, you're mistaken, it's Major--"

"Are you asking me about my family because you're foolish enough to think of greeting my family!? Also, there has to be a proper process to this sort of thing! You're so unromantic in delivering it under the bowl."

"So I say, calm down already. What do you mean by that?"

While I was trying to calm her down, someone else who would mess the situation further opened the door to the detective agency.

"Hello Alice. I've starting Spring break today, so I'll take care of you--"

Dropping by was Ayaka in casual clothes, who entered the

bedroom, and looked beyond my shoulder towards Alice. Once she realized that Alice was holding onto the marriage certificate, she widened her eyes, she shoved me aside, and got onto the bed.

“Alice, what is this? Why do you have a proposal with the bowl of miso soup? Are you trying to imitate the I want to taste your miso soup cliché? This won’t do though. Fujishima-kun is bad at cooking; choose something else.”

“Hey, what are you saying? How did it end up with me proposing to him?”

With a blushing face, Alice yelled,

“Hm? So is it the other way around?” What’s with that, “No can do, Fujishima-kun!? Alice might add Dr. Pepper if she’s to cook miso coup!”

My appetite was gone just from imagining that.

“No, can’t you just get away from this miso soup thing already?”

Ayaka immediately retreated, pulling some distance from the miso soup.

“That’s not it!”

“Listen up, Alice. You got to know that if you can’t play dumb to this extent, you can’t continue to act as a couple manzai with Fujishima-kun!”

“What nonsense are you spouting here!?”

The bed shook as Alice was enraged, and the empty cans piled high up tumbled over.

Surprisingly, the one closest to the truth was Yondaime. The following day, I visited the Hirasaka-gumi office, discussed the future plans in the storage restroom cum computer room, while casually dropping this topic.

“Probably 14 or 15.”

Yondaime simply answered.

“...Eh. How do you know?”

“There was once when Alice wasn’t feeling well, and I brought her to the hospital. That general hospital was ridiculously big, and she often visited it when she was at home. Alice had no health insurance, but they let her in after seeing her face. I’m guessing the Shionjis invested heavily in that hospital. Alice herself said that she was born in that hospital.”

Alice somehow visited a doctor. I was a little surprised.

“Then, I heard from the doctor that it used to be some common small-scale hospital, but before Alice was born, the hospital suddenly received a large investment of various top-notch facilities. The Shionjis probably invested heavily behind the scenes to ensure a failsafe, that there might be a high risk of miscarriage. I was curious about it, and looked into it; I found that it was 15 years ago.”

I was impressed. As a detective, this guy’s way better than me.

“...But why spend so much effort to elevate the facilities of a small hospital? Her family’s rich, and has lots of top-notch hospitals under its name.”

Yondaime narrowed his eyes, and coldly said,

“Surely there’s a reason why they couldn’t deliver her there.”

Suddenly, I recalled the words from Alice, that she was ‘a child

who should not be born’.

At this moment, I began to regret, for not denying Alice’s self-reproaching.

“Hey, let me make this clear. Everything’s just my conjecture.”

Yondaime hurriedly added on, probably because he noticed the grim look on my face.

“What the doctors say are no more than rumors. Maybe the investments had nothing to do with Alice. Also, the matter of age isn’t exactly important here.”

“Eh, ah, yeah, that’s right...”

But, 14-15? Is it really okay if her appearance differs so much from her actual age? She looks like an elementary school kid, and no more than 11-12. Of course, it’s no wonder she developed poorly given her poor eating habits.

“It’s likely she was born differently.” Yondaime said with a gloomy look, “Living on carbonic acid, sleeping only an hour. She doesn’t have a normal body for one. The doctor said that it’s a probably of genetics.”

“I...see. So that’s how it is...”

She’s been such a unique girl, and it might be acceptable to say that her body *was weird to begin with*. Well, it’s too unhealthy either way.

But even so, if I’m to switch off the air conditioning of the office immediately, have her put on normal clothes, eat normal foods, and go out to exercise, surely she would faint. What do I do then?

“Ahh, right, to prevent something like that from happening again, I’ll tell you where the hospital is.”

Yondaime tossed a note with the hospital address and number.

“I’m not going to bring her to that sort of place again.”

“Eh, bu-but, you want me to bring her there?”

“Aren’t you her assistant?”

“But I don’t have a car...”

“Ask Hiro, or call for a taxi.”

I sighed. Let’s just hope this doesn’t happen.

“Speaking of which, are you intending to accompany her for the rest of your life?”

Once we were done, Yondaime looked over at me,

“...Ah? ...eh, no, well...”

I could only speak vaguely.

“There’s still a year until you graduate. What will you do in the future? The admin and accountant roles for the gang are still available. Best if you can just continue with these jobs.”

I blinked in a daze as I stared back at Yondaime.

“...Erm, I can’t actually join the gang, right?”

“You’re still a student. Once you graduate or drop out, you can join.”

Yondaime sat back on the resting bed, looking back and forth between me and the computer.

“Even as Alice’s assistant, you can’t be receiving requests 24-7.

Our work here isn't that heavy, so it should be fine for you to handle both sides at once. What do you think?"

Then, Yondaime gave a specific salary. The compensation package was pretty hefty.

Surprisingly to myself even, without hesitation, I gave an immediate answer,

"Thanks for the offer, but I don't intend to bother the Hirasaka-gumi further."

Once I said so, I found my tone to be arrogant, and hastily added on,

"Eh, while I've been under everyone's care till this point, I will surely help if there's a need to, as payment. But I don't intend to be employed here..."

"I guessed so."

Yondaime's answer was pretty calm.

"You know quite a fair bit of our gang's secrets, and it'll be easy to get you involved in some way--"

Yondaime quietly looked over at a dark corner of the room,

"But I knew you would reject."

Why? I gave a doubtful look at his sidelong face.

"You aren't made for this gang. While I don't think you'll get a proper job, if you really are to be part of the underworld, you'll rather work alone."

"R-really?" I was so taken aback, my tone changed, "While I just rejected you, it's not like I don't have any clear goals regarding the future. To be honest, whether I can actually graduate from

high school is one issue.”

“I know. I can tell.”

I guessed so.

“But there has to be a path somehow. Your talent is in going crazy and doing unscrupulous things at crucial moments, and then making it through in the end.”

...I don't think you're praising me at all.

“If you're a little more daring, you can become an elite in this world.”

“Daring, eh, basically...”

Better not ask what this world is about. I could infer, and if I was mistaken, the mood would have worsened. Thus, better use this chance to ask something that might come in handy.

“For example, while you rejected my invitation, you never thought about what you're going to do in the future. Why aren't you more daring in asking me to recommend you a job?”

I didn't know how to ask,

“...Eh, no, this might be too daring. If I really did ask, wouldn't you be fuming, Yondaime?”

“Of course, and I would have beaten you until you can't open your mouth.”

Of course you'll be pissed off!

“But, that'll just be it.”

“What do you mean ‘just be it’ after beating me so badly I can't open my mouth!”

“It’s not like I’ll kill you or break ties with you. Also, if I’m to meet such a shameless guy, I’ll give him a few blows, show some pity, and give him some lifeline.”

I scratched my head, sighing,

“So without any risk, it’s possible to be a little more daring; is that what you’re saying?”

“That’s how it is.”

“I’ll consider that.”

“I’ll repeat myself though. Once this happen, I’ll go all out.”

“I’ll really consider that...”

Once I was done with business, I intended to get up, only for there to be cracking beyond the door behind me.

“Hey stop pushing.” “What’s going on?” “Can’t hear clearly.”

Yondaime frowned as he got up from the bed, went over, and pulled the handle down. At that moment, a bunch of hulks in black T-shirt, who were pressing upon the door, were tangled up as they tumbled into the storage.

“...What the hell are you idiots doing?”

Yondaime’s temples were popping as he glared down at his subordinates lying on the floor.

“S-sorry.” Pole, lying at the bottom, was sheepishly grinning away,

“We heard that you have been trying to invite Narumi Aniki, Sou-san, and wanted to know the response.” Lying atop Pole was Rocky, looking at us as he answered.

“We’re done. Now scram, don’t blow us.”

Yondaime poked at Pole’s head with a finger, and the latter excitedly got up, saying,

“So Aniki’s gonna put on our logo?”

The blockheads lying on Pole rolled away to the restroom of the office,

“Eh...ahh, no, er, sorry. I didn’t do so.”

I said as I hid behind Yondaime. Pole and Rocky’s faces looked roasted as a result.

“Wh-why!? Is there something bad about our gang?”

“Is the office too small!? Too dirty!? Too noisy!?”

Everything, I guess.

“Erm, I’ve been under the Hirasaka-gumi’s care for a long time. Sorry for getting you gets to help me with work, so...”

“We’ll improbe!” “We’ll be kinder when we treat others!”

The gang members knelt downbefore me. Yondaime shot me a look, hinting me for to do something. Seriously, I wanted to jump out of the window...

“How do we become more approachable?” “We’re a bunch of gorillas though.”

“Can’t we imitate some popular animals?” “But those popular animals are all small, right?” “We can’t change out of our black uniforms. We don’t have the money.” “Anyway, is there really an animal that’s black, large and popular?”

“A panda!” “That’s it!” “You’re pretty smart!” Seriously, none

of these add up.

“Alright, get the white paint!”

“Sou-san, are the panda eyes black or white?”

Yondaime landed a punch on the face of Rocky, who asked the question.

“Blue!” “As to be expected of you, Sou-san!”

The others saw the blue bruise appear on Rocky’s eye as the latter fell over, and started a ruckus. Yondaime was taken aback by how stupid they were, and after a second, he turned to look at me,

“Hey, get these idiots to shut up. You’re the expert, right?”

Not at all!

But if they were to continue with this tomfoolery while blocking the door, I wouldn’t be able to return back. No choice. I could only approach Pole and the others who were blocking the door, debating furiously over the color of a panda’s paw.

“Erm, dressing up as a panda isn’t a good thing.”

“Why!?” “Aren't pandas popular!?”

“I bought some sasamochi!” “We’ll just eat the bamboo leaves, so please finish the rest, aniki!”

No thanks. I’ll puke from eating too much. Wait, this isn’t the time for this.

“Think about it, aren't pandas black and white?”

“Yeah!” “That’s why we’re using white paint--”

“Black and white are the same colors as a patrol car, right? Those are police colors. Is it really okay to be dressed like them?”

The hunks in black T-shirts paled in unison,

“I-I see...”

“We never thought of that...”

“As to be expected of you, aniki. Straight to the point!”

“We're all idiots!”

“We nearly became one of the stripes!”

They really bought what I said. Even I found this to be utterly ridiculous.

“Hey, now's not the time to be spacing out here!” Pole turned back to yell at the others, “Get to Ueno park and duke it out against the pandas!”

“Righto!” “Can't let the stripes underestimate us!”

The gang members stormed towards the exit of the office. While I was wondering if these gorillas should be caged in Ueno zoo, Yondaime said,

“You're not going to command them?”

“Don't say that!” No way am I going to lead this circus!

✱

And so, it was the end of March, where the cherry blossoms would bloom in Tokyo. On a certain afternoon, I was requested by Alice to perform several procedures at the bank. I was intending to head down an alley to the right of the Meiji Highway, back

to 'Hanamaru', only to hear a shrill honking of a car behind me. I turned around to look, and found a blue open bonnet Aston Martin parked right next to me. The one driving was a young woman with long hair, wearing sunglasses. She was probably in her twenties, and though it was early Spring, she was dressed in a low neckline dress along with a translucent shawl, giving a refreshing vibe. Also, she had a cross-shaped necklace upon her.

Once she saw my face, she was immediately taken aback--

"Fujishima, Narumi-kun?"

After a moment, I realized she called my name,

"...Ah, ehh, that's me."

"Get in."

"Huh?"

"Into the car, now."

While I was blinking away, at a loss of what to do, she leaned over, grabbed my arm, and pulled me into the seat next to her.

"Wah, eh?"

As the door was not opened, I fell head first into the seat.

I was struggling as I leaned over, and she pulled the brake, driving off.

"Hey, wa-wait up."

"Put the seatbelt on. You don't want to fall over, right?"

I fumbled around, and my butt tumbled onto the seat. While I withstood the acceleration strong enough to crush my body, I fidgeted for the seatbelt, and latched it.

By the time I managed to catch my breath, the car had already turned right at the Meiji Shrine juncture, racing towards Aoyama,

“Ah, erm,”

At this point, I stared at the sidelong face of the female driver. It seemed everything I wanted to say was blown aside by the on-coming gusts.

Through her sunglasses, she gave me a long stare. “There’s no need to ask, no?” so she appeared to imply. Surely, her facial appearance explained everything, and all my doubts were gone.

A forlorn feeling was born. While I did not know what it was about, and while I did not know her true identity, I instinctively knew something was about to come to an end.

The car drove into the underground parking lot of a large tower-shaped mansion in Aoyama.

“Let’s get off here. Do you mind carrying some stuff for me? I can’t take them all.”

So I did as she said, and moved out lots of paper bags and boxes out from the boot. These things had the logo of some high-end brands printed on them, probably clothes and shoes. She said she could not carry them all, but in fact, she had me carry them all. She’s acting like a Queen, here, and I could not bring myself to be angry. While waiting for the elevator, she unleashed a barrage of questions to me.

“Where do you normally buy your clothes?”

“Do you exercise well?”

“You do slouch quite a bit, you know?”

‘Have you had anyone customize shoes for you?’

It seemed she was pretty particular about my appearance, or rather, displeased about it.

After entering the massive elevator surrounded by mirrors, half the size of the classroom, she checked if there was anyone around, before circling me boldly, and sized me up from head to toe. As it was too awkward, I nearly dropped the bags of goods occupying my hands.

“I should have bought your clothes. Shall we do so another time?”

I really did not understand why she said so. I guess this person really was not bemused to see someone with such poor fashion sense so close to her.

The elevator stopped, and it was indicated that we had arrived at the top.

Since we had to remove our shoes, I supposed it's a personal residence. Looking around the house, I could only marvel. It seemed I was in the living room, as there was a carpet on the floor along with tables and sofas. There was a step on the floor, and the other side of the room was a little lower than this place. A long sofa and coffee table was basked under the sun there. Two walls were completely made of glass, and the blue skies could be seen from beyond. It seemed this apartment was so spacious, it took up the entire floor, and I could not give an estimate of the area it occupied. The indirect lighting, wardrobe, flower pots, and everything else were designed with modern curves. The stairs leading to the upper level were made of glass, and there was a

“Just put aside the stuff and sit down. Will you like to have a drink?”

“Ah, erm, no, I'm fine.”

I placed the bags and boxes on the flooring, and with much

trepidation, sat at the corner of a sofa. She ushered a tray from the bar to the far left, and served a bottle of vodka, two glasses, and an ice bucket on the table before me. I'm still underaged, you know? Also, drinking vodka in broad daylight?

She sat down on the sofa opposite mine, and finally removed her sunglasses.

With her bluish eyes staring at me, I felt strangely relaxed, and mesmerized, as though the air within me was quickly drawn out.

That's right. My belief was strengthened. They were really alike.

"Shall I call you Narumi-kun?" she asked, filling the two glasses with vodka.

"Y-yes."

"I suppose I won't have to introduce myself now."

She raised a glass, and gulped it down, her face unflinching.

"...I suppose." I nodded. "But at least, do tell me your name."

A fuzzy, faint smile appeared upon her eyes.

Beyond her fingertip were a few magazines piled carelessly upon the carpeted floor. Each of them was related to the fashion world, none I knew. All I knew that the model at the top was her, and the caption next to it was written.

'Charismatic designer/model Shionji Mari, tells you all about beauty as she leads the artistic trends.'



I looked back towards her, the smile finally looking somewhat realistic to me.

“You have been taking care of my little sister all this while, haven’t you?” Mari-san smiled.

✧

The following day, I was cleaning the detective agency while Alice was eating, and my eyes inadvertently observed her face, matching her along with Mari-san’s. They’re really alive. If Alice’s able to grow into a healthy adult, she might be like Mari-san. Honestly though, I suspected if she really had this biological function.

“Now what? Why are you staring at me?”

Alice furiously slammed the chopsticks onto the table.

“This bad habit of yours just wouldn’t change no matter how I nitpick at this.”

“Ahh, so-sorry.”

Uh oh. I just stopped and staring at her without thinking.

“Seriously. You went back right away after you were done... and now you’re spacing out today for some reason...”

Alice muttered away as she brought the noodles to her mouth. Recently, she’s starting to consume some carbohydrates and proteins. Grow well and be like Mari-san, so I quietly prayed.

Speaking of which, I didn’t know how I was about to mention my encounter with Mari-san. After leaving her residence the previous day, I sent a message to Alice, stating that I was not going to return to the agency, and went home. To be honest, it was re-

ally tough for me to say things like, I met your sister, and we chatted lots.

“O-oh yeah, Alice.”

My voice got so cheery, it sounded fake,

“Are you intending to stay at this agency forever?”

Alice lifted her eyes from the bowl.

“What do you mean?”

“It’s nothing. Just, eh...”

Momentarily speechless, I scanned the room, and said,

“I see that you have so many dolls, and there’s no place to put them. Just wondering if you ever thought of moving out. Like, out of Tokyo or something?”

Diverting the topic this way might be stretching it. I reflected upon what I had just said. Alice frowned,

“Isn’t it wonderful to fill this room with so many dolls, I can’t move at all?”

Ah, right. I guess so.

“Anyway, why are we talking about moving out of the capital?”

I was intending to ask if she had any intending of moving overseas, but it’s no wonder she would assume out of the capital. It’s not natural to divert the topic again, so I went with the flow.

“Nothing much, just that a large house might be pricey in Tokyo.”

“I never thought you would be worried about my wallet. I do

have enough finances to purchase a bungalow with a garden in the middle of Tokyo.”

“Ah, yeah, I’m really sorry...”

“Also, the capital’s much more chaotic, and cases come by often, so it’s better for a detective to reside here, no? Moving away is out of the question.”

I guessed so. All the cases we had received involved events in the capital.

“What’s with this sudden question? Are you unhappy about this office or something?”

“That’s not what I mean...”

We went completely off topic, and while regretting this, I started to recall what Mari-san talked about the previous day.

“No need for your self-introduction there. I have done thorough investigations on you, Narumi-kun.”

Mari-san shook the ice in the glass, causing a delightful clank. She had just finished her third drink, but showed no signs of drunkenness, her voice fluent.

“Of course I would investigate the partner of that cute Yuuko. I would have separated you from her long ago if you were some unsavoury person. Hoho, but that child really is well protected by her friends, some amazing people gathered around her, don’t you think so, Narumi-kun?”

“Erm, well...I guess.”

Since she had just included me, I answered sheepishly,

“So I watched her from afar, and not do anything.”

“But you just abducted me, you know...”

“Ahaha.” Mari-san laughed as she looked up at the ceiling, her black hair, as silky smooth as Alice, fluttered by her shoulders.

“Recently, I have something I have to discuss with Yuuko no matter what. Since I so happened to have bought something nearby, I intended to visit her, but I found so, so I couldn’t help but pull you in.”

Can you stop with the ‘can’t help but pull people into your car’ thing?

“Discuss what? Does it have anything to do with me?”

“Before then, do answer a question of mine.”

Mari-san left the sofa, went around the table, and sat next to me. We were so close that I lowered my head nervously, and she tapped my neck with the glass, which was so cold, I jolted.”

“Wh-what are you doing?”

“I see that you’re being so tense, so I can’t help myself here.”

Can you stop touching people as and when you want to?”

“Doesn’t Yuuko do such things to you?”

“Not—”

I stopped myself from denying it. Speaking of which, she does typically smack my face with Dr. Pepper cans or dolls.

Initially, I had assumed Mari-san was Alice’s older sister simply because of their physical resemblance, but they do act similarly. For example, the way they mock, or act dramatically.

“This is what I want to ask.” Mari-san said, “What is your rela-

tionship with Yuuko? My investigations can't discern your heart after all."

"What relationship, you mean?"

I carefully chose my words to avoid any trouble.

At this point, I can't tell what Shionji Mari is thinking. She brought me to her house (it's probably hers), but never stated her intent, and I didn't know what she knew about me, or what she thought of me. What I wanted to know however was whether she was on Alice's side.

I racked through my brain, trying to recall about the many things Alice mentioned about the Shionjis. The only Shionji she ever met was her uncle, Gorou, or so she said. In other words, she did not want to meet anyone else, including this Mari-san. Recently, she did mention that during her days at the Shionjis, she had interacted with her sister and cousins. Maybe she's not too distant from Mari-san, but she was a lot closer to Gorou-sensei, at least.

"You two aren't on unspeakable terms, right?"

Mari-san's alluring smile pressed on while I remained silent.

"No, that's—"

I hesitated, before speaking up again.

"Do you mind if I ask something?"

Mari-san looked a little surprised.

"Are you asking what I intend to ask you to do? Hm, what do I do now?"

"No, this isn't what I mean. Mari-san, I want to know your relationship with Alice, erm Yuuko-san."

This time, the surprised look remained for several seconds.

“...Sisters, you know?”

She blinked, answering. I shook my head, saying,

“That’s not what I mean. How do you view your little sister? To be direct, are you friend, or foe?”

I watched the murkiness spread over her face, and continued,

“I don’t know what kind of past Alice has, but I do know she ran away from home. You should understand why I’m a little wary of the Shionjis, right? I can’t just talk before I know what you’re planning to do to her.”

After a long silence, Mari-san shrugged, and chuckled. I couldn’t help but be mesmerized by this. It was an alluring chuckle, chiselled by the thousand stares. The shoulder brushed me by, and I was quietly taken aback, my breathing stifled.

“Well, you might think I’m just a brat who talks big,”

I felt I had to say something, so I continued,

“But I’m serious.”

“Understood. That’s pretty amazing of you.”

In any case, I really felt that she was treating me like a kid. I’m still a kid though.

“But Narumi-kun, I would have answered ‘friend’ to that question no matter whether it’s truthful or not. You can’t really tell much from there, right?”

Feeling a little repulsed,

“It’s not like I can’t determine something here. I can’t be cer-

tain whether you're lying or not, but it's a lot better than not asking."

"That's true" Mari-san smiled, "That should be enough from me however."

"...Eh?"

"I already got the answer I wanted."

I blinked in surprised, and stared back at Mari-san,

"From your tone, I can infer your relationship with Yuuko. You really view her as an important person, right?"

"Eh...ahh, I, erm, sorta."

Having made a swing and a miss, I hastily tried to respond, only to fumble with my words.

"In that case, even for what I do intend to ask you to do next, you should be able to do something beneficial to Yuuko. I can tell you now."

"What—is that request?"

Mari-san put the glass down, stopped smiling, and looked at me in the eyes, saying this,

"I will like you to ask if Yuuko has any intentions of leaving Tokyo."

I held my breath, and quietly awaited her following words.

"Best if it's overseas..."

"Why do you ask?"

She looked aside for the first time, pursing her lips, wondering

how she should explain. I glared at her lips, and was peeved to think that she was hiding some cards.

“Simply put—”

Mari-san seemed to have given up on struggling as she sighed,

“I think it’s about time, that I should have Yuuko move in with me. I intend to move my base to Paris, so I thought I should ask.”

She stopped, glanced aside at me, and dropped her shoulders, saying,

“You won’t accept this simple explanation, right?”

“Of course.”

An older sister asking her little sister to live together after years of not meeting together? That’s definitely not as simple as ‘thought I should ask’.

“I really can’t reveal too much, you’re an outsider after all.”

And this time, I was infuriated.

“Since you refuse to say, please don’t ask me to do such a thing.”

“Why? I can make you promise without saying anything.”

“Eh? No-no way. Why do you think I’ll agree to your demands?”

“Now then, let’s think of ways to get you to agree, Narumikun.”

I looked up at the ceiling in despair, and found a dumb look reflected in a distorted manner on the metal ball décor.

I'm most terrified of such people who are reasonable and understanding, but yet so deliberately demanding. They're able to exert pressure by smiling, knowing they have the advantage.

"Why do you think I'll agree? Are you going to let me go and abduct me every day, starting tomorrow, and drag me on your car to this place until I agree?"

"That sounds good." Mari-san smiled, "But, to make it a little simpler. I'm not letting you go home until you agree."

Can she do it? I'm a guy after all, so I should be strong enough, right? Will there be some muscular bodyguards barging in once she whistles? Or is there a security function in the elevator that prevents guests from using it.

I started to sense that it was pointless to dispute this with her, and quickly surrendered.

"Got it. I just need to ask Alice, right? I'll ask."

Of course, if Alice really does go overseas, I'll be really lonely, but she, a NEET who hates to toil, can't possibly agree to this request. So I thought I could ask. Mari-san peeked at my face, asking,

"Can't you put up a little more resistance? You're no fun."

"You think I'm here to play?"

She's probably drunk without looking the part, is she?

"Anyway, thank you, Narumi-san."

"No worries." I answered, still feeling miffed.

"I know it's a request from me, a ridiculous one at that, but why do you agree to it?"

“I’m finding it ridiculous too!” I started yelling, “I too have a ridiculous sounding question to ask. Have you not thought I’m agreeing to it because I just want to get out of here?”

“Not at all.”

I nearly tumbled over, and lowered my voice, asking,

“...Why?”

“I have investigated that you’re a prodigious con artist who managed to talk your way out with that amazing mouth of yours. I can tell that you’re not bluffing me.”

I gave an audible gulp.

I thought she was teasing me, but unwitting, I was being cornered.

“...Why’s that?”

“Because both of us do treasure Yuuko. I can tell you’re trusting me because of that reason, and agreed to my request, right?”

I couldn’t say anything more, and could only respond with my eyes. She was completely correct. I couldn’t say that I trusted her completely, No, she’s really spot on, just that I wasn’t willing to agree with that notion. I just trusted her without thinking, after seeing how unreasonable a woman she was who doted on her little sister.

Is this good?

Loving someone doesn’t mean being on someone’s side. I had encountered many tragic figures who loved others, only to cause ruination.

But I just couldn’t reject her request.

So I recalled the reluctant look on Mari-san's face as I watched Alice, seated on the bed of the detective agency, once again realizing how similar the two sisters looked. This might be a reason why I agreed, because it felt as though Alice was the one asking me.

"You can move to anywhere away from Tokyo all you please. If you're going to Kanagawa, you'll have to take a half hour car ride to work every day."

"Eh, but it's pointless to move away by myself down."

"What else do you want? You've been hinting in a roundabout manner—"

At that moment, Alice realized something, and kept quiet, her face blushing.

"Ar-are you talking about co-cohabitation?"

"Eh? How do you know?"

"What's inside your head?"

The pile of dolls fell like an avalanche as Alice was once again enraged.

"Coronary arteriovenous fistula is a trivial matter compared to how short-circuited your mind is!"

"Coronary arteriovenous fistula? What's that?"

"It's a disease where the arteries and veins of the heart are connected! That's not important! You-you want to live together with me? We haven't made the request. Everything has to go in order, right? N-no, this doesn't mean I'll go make the request?"

I can't believe she's still thinking about that. Thanks to that, I was shocked into thinking that she knew about Mari-san's re-

quest.

“Living with you? Enough with that joke already. Just cleaning the house is tiresome.”

“What did you say?” What’s she angry about?”

“Even if I really have such thoughts, you don’t want to live with me, do you?”

Her blushing face hid her drooping ears. What’s so awkward about this question? Or, is there anything to think about?

She turned her face aside, clenching her fists, releasing them, and clenched again.

“...I-I can consider if you’re willing to dress up as a doll forever

Please allow me to refuse.

The topic’s way out of hand, so I left the agency.

I knew this would have happened. She hates leaving that six tatami room, let alone Japan. How could she possibly think of moving?

I went to the back door, and gave Mari-san a call.

“Looks like she has no intention to leave.”

“I see. As expected....since you can’t convince her either—it appears we’ll have to convince her in another manner

“But isn’t it too forceful to try probing her without telling me anything?”

That’s enough already, so I wanted to say, only to be cut off by her.

“No other choice. Thanks. I’ll talk to her directly.”

“...Huh? You’re coming over?”

“Right now.”

Right now?

An hour later, that blue Aston Martin was parked before ‘Ramen Hanamaru’. I was doing my Spring assignments at the back door back then. Good thing the teachers were merciful enough not to retain me, but the price was that I had loads of assignments to do. The NEET detective gang isn’t around, Min-san and Ayaka were working quietly in the kitchen, and I was quietly doing my homework. The solace was however shattered by the overwhelmingly powerful engine. Stunned, I lifted my head, and found that bright blue car, she actually came by? I thought with disbelief.

On this day, Mari-san was dressed in a white, slightly green pantsuit, the cross-shaped necklace still upon her. Once she got off the car, she approached in a stylish manner, as though grass would grow at every step she took. She was holding a bag in her right hand, and once she noticed me, gently waved her left hand.

“Min Li-san is here, no? I’ll go greet her.”

Saying that, Mari-san pulled the back door of the kitchen, shocking me. She’s unexpectedly someone who knows social etiquette. I hastily followed her through the back door.

Once they saw her enter, both Min-san and Ayaka were unsurprisingly taken aback, rooted to the spot with chopper and onions in hands.

“Hello there. My sister has been in your care.”

Mari-san bowed and greeted Min-san from beyond the

counter.

“...Ahhh...you’re Alice’s—older sister, right?”

Min-san was spaced out for a moment, only to say this. Next to her, Ayaka sounded increasingly excited, but was still in a state of shock, her mouth agape, unable to say anything. Ehh~ Alice’s older sister? They really look alike! I could practically hear her screaming that inside her heart.

“A token of appreciation. Here.”

Mari-san handed the bag over the counter.

“Eh? Ahh, no, you don’t have to—”

Saying that, Min-san widened her eyes at the content of the bag.

“—I-isn’t this Frankie Wattier ice cream? They don’t have a shop in Japan, right?”

“I’ve heard that you’re an ice cream expert, so I had others import it over. Hope you love it.”

“I don’t just love it. I wanted to fly to France to learn. I had it once, and always wanted to eat it.”

It’s the first time I ever saw Min-san’s eyes sparkle like a kid, even twirling around while raising her bag up high. After that, she seemed to have noticed Ayaka and me looking at her dumbfoundedly, awkwardly wiped her hands on her apron, and coughed,



“Ahh, erm, hello. I’m the boss here.”

Min-san bowed to greet Mari-san as though nothing had happened, and the latter too responded with a smile.

“The name’s Shionji Mari.”

“Shinozaki Ayaka!” Ayaka hastily leaned over the counter, “Eh, I’m a part-timer here. Alice’s friend.”

“So you’re the one who gets Yuuko to enter the bath.”

“Woah! You know that?”

She investigated that much? I quietly clicked my tongue.

“Spacing out here is Fujishima!” Ayaka said, grabbing my shoulders.

“Yes, I know. We met just yesterday.”

Mari-san beamed.

“Really? Fujishima-kun, you knew Alice has an older sister? Why didn’t you tell us, seriously?”

Why are you so excited?”

“Erm, eh, Mari-san? Well?”

Min-san glanced aside at the ceiling, saying,

“Alice’s upstairs, always locked in her room, so—”

At that moment, bum bum bum, I could hear noisy footsteps down the emergency stairs outside. Right after,, the door behind Mari-san opened,

“—Nee-sama?”

It was Alice, dressed in pajamas. She probably came running downstairs after seeing the surveillance footage. Her cheeks were flushed with agitation, and within her sights was Mari-san, who had just turned around.

For a moment, I felt time stand still.

They were really alike, but this wasn't a simple issue.

It felt as though there was a magic mirror between them, reflecting their appearances from the distant past or future. That was the impression I had as a third party watching the Shionji sisters.

The various complicated emotions appeared upon Alice's face, and vanished. Her thin lips attempted to say something, but remained frozen at the first word.

Mari-san took a step towards her sister, embracing the slender body into her clutches.

“...Yuuko. We finally meet.”

Alice didn't answer. She reached her hands out with a disgruntled look, pushing away from her sister.

For some reason, seeing them then left me with much sadness. I had a feeling the sisters shouldn't have been reunited.

Sadly, my premonition became real.

But back then—I had no way of knowing.

“Stay here, Narumi.”

I brought Mari-san up to the detective agency, and was about to leave, but Alice called me from the bed, stopping me. I had my

hand on the door handle as I turned around to ask.

“Eh? Erm, but...”

Mari-san too was seated on the bed, hugging a doll, raising it, and flipping it around, looking interested.

“Don’t you have something to discuss with Mari-san? Isn’t it inconvenient for me to be around?”

“Never mind that. You should just stay behind. I don’t want to be alone with nee-sama. She’s definitely not going to talk about anything good here.”

Hearing Alice say this so disgruntledly, I looked over worriedly to Mari-san.

“It’s fine. I’m fine if it’s you, Narumi-kun.” Mari-san smiled.

“You don’t mind if it’s **Narumi**?” Alice pursed her little mouth, “Why, sounds like you already trust him? Seriously, when did you meet? Those weird questions he made were from you, right?”

“Y-yeah, hmm.”

No wonder she figured it out. It was really unnatural.

“I suppose it’s time for you to live with me, so I had Narumi-kun ask if you’re willing to. I asked him not to mention me too, so it’s not his fault.”

“Enough with the excuses. I’ll lecture him good later.”

Ahh, she’s fuming...

“Leaving that aside. Nee-sama.” Alice turned towards her sister, asking, “You want me to stay with you? Which country makes such jokes?”

“I’m serious. Do you want to move to Paris? I’ve been there a few times. It’s really nice there. You’ll probably take a liking to that place.”

Alice coldly narrowed her eyes,

“If something’s up, just spill it. This stupid dithering is just a waste of time.”

Even I, who knew nothing, realized it’s been years since the sisters talked to each other, and there was no way Mari-san could ask to live together for no reason. She scowled, and glanced towards me. Alice too followed suit, saying,

“If it’s not something Narumi should know of, I don’t want to know either.”

Does Alice not trust her sister that much? I was really perturbed by this. She was as wary as an angered porcupine, the spikes poking at my heart, leaving me restless. Left with no choice, I leaned my back on the fridge, and sat on the floor. Mari-san remained still by the bedside, staring at me. Finally, she lowered her eyes, and sighed, turning towards her little sister who was within grasp, yet so despairingly distant.

“...Grandpa has fallen ill.”

Alice, who was cupping a knee, clearly looked stiffened and cold on her aloof face. Without looking at Alice, Mari-san said,

“He was hospitalized last weekend, at the hospital father’s at. It’s really sudden...he was well, yet the doctor’s saying his condition’s critical. He said he really want to meet you, so—”

I could feel Mari-san trying her best to consider how to explain. Even I was grimacing bitterly.

“From now on, the Shionjis will be gathered around you, but I can protect you. How about you come along with me to Paris?”

“I’m not so arrogant to say that I can protect myself.”

Alice statedly coldly,

“But I should at least choose how I should protect myself. I don’t need your care, nee-sama. I’ve been living this way after all.”

Mari-san appeared to be on the verge of tears once she heard this blunt answer.

After Mari-san left, Alice silently went back to type at the keyboard. I took out the posh looking dolls from the bags on the bed, and left behind beside her. These were from Mari-san, but she never once looked at them.

It’s probably a complicated relationship between them. So I could think.

Even in the past, I could figure out that she didn’t have a nice family. Seems like it was worse than I thought though. Oh, it seemed Alice had said she installed so many cameras around the building; probably because she didn’t want her family to take her back. Does it involve domestic violence, or something as simple as being lonely? The family name Shionji bound Alice’s life in a chaotic, malicious manner,

Call me up if there’s anything. So I wanted to tell Alice, but my throat just wouldn’t abide. I thought it’s because the room filled with cold air was filled with baseless thoughts, listening to their conversation. I wanted to clear my throat, and Alice said, her back turned on me,

“My sister and I were born out of wedlock.”

Wedlock. This distant term fluttered uneasily within my heart, like the dust in the sunlight.

“My father never had a child with his wife, but had two with

his mistress. It seemed my mother died soon after I was born. I didn't know how she looked."

The tapping at the keyboard echoed vaguely in this brief silence.

"The grandpa we talk of is actually the oldest grand uncle, not the actual one. He himself has no children, and treats his nephew as his children. That nephew is our father. He probably really wanted 'grandchildren'. Even after us sisters were born out of wedlock, he never abandoned us. However, he couldn't raise us openly as Shionjis."

Alice's tone left me really uneasy. Children that shouldn't be born. I recalled how she had described herself.

"It's common. Nothing important."

I shook my head, wanting to say, that's not the case. It might be true, but this life does belong to the one and only Alice.

However, I felt this consolation was too hollow, and couldn't say anything.

CHAPTER TWO

“I’m not joking at all. She’s so beautiful that I thought I saw stars in broad daylight.”

Hiro was at the back door of ‘Ramen Hanamaru’, agitatedly describing some vague metaphor to Major and Tetsu-senpai. Seems like he was referring to Mari-san yesterday.

“Good thing I came hurrying over after receiving Ayaka’s message, and got to see her vanish she went back.”

“Does she really resemble Alice?” Major too was interested. He didn’t see Mari-san.

“Really. Hiro and I came by, and we had a look. It’s like Alice was all grown up too. “Tetsu-senpai said, “Looking at her, she’s probably about the same age as us.”

Tetsu-senpai and Hiro’s probably around twenties, but Hiro shook his head, saying,

“I remember she’s 26.”

“26? Really? Looks like a high school kid. Anyway, Hiro, how did you know how old she was?”

“She a fashion model. Her foreign name is Marie Shion. Not a lot of people know her in Japan, but she’s very famous overseas. She also has her brand.”

As to be expected of Hiro, well versed in such stuff.

“But I did see the photo of Marie Shion a few times. Never once did I feel that she’s Alice’s older sister.”

Hiro brought several female magazines before us. Mari-san would show various expressions as a ‘fashion model’, and hardly resembled Alice. Also, since they were all foreign magazines, I couldn’t see the name Shionji there. If I hadn’t known that Alice had an older sister, it would be expected for me not to know.

Also, there was one Japanese magazine, which Tetsu-senpai picked and flipped about, discovering that it was a special edition magazine of Marie Shion. The personal information written in the interview clearly stated that she was 26 years old.

“It’s written here, ‘Marie’s pride is that that she’ll sell clothes that she wore and accepted’. So she’s her own model?”

“Speaking of which, people really do look forward to seeing her wear a swimsuit, right? She just wouldn’t be a swimsuit model. Look, there’s a lot of amazing new summer products.” Hiro excitedly flipped through the pages, showing them to everyone. Dressed in vibrant bikinis and giving hearty smiles are white ladies, and none featured Mari-san. Speaking of which, they’re releasing new swimsuits when it’s just Spring? Or is it that in the fast changing fashion world, those that don’t seize the next season three months away will be wiped out?”

“I asked a girl who like Marie Shion, and she said Marie never poses in swimsuits.”

“So she’s the type to not wear them after being famous?”

“Don’t put her on the level of gravure models. Ahh, why doesn’t she wear one? Do I have to hitch her up with her? Then she’ll wear one at the pool or the beach for me alone to see.”

Hey, she’s Alice’s older sister. Hitch her up? You sure that’s fine?

“You really love celbes, Hiro.” Major suddenly became a little vulgar. “She has a trendy fashion brand, does her own modelling,

and she's definitely rich. The place Vice Admiral Fujishima was taken to seems to be some billion yen mansion in Aoyama."

"Please don't say I was taken to, okay?" What if someone misunderstands?

"Her car's pretty posh too."

Hiro looked mesmerized,

"I really want to drive that D89 Volante, But I think it's impossible to ask her out and drive the car...right, I just need to get married with her, and I can drive as much times as I want. Then Alice can will me brother-in-law. Seems weird."

Hold on hold on, Hiro. Hearing you say that, I find it strange too.

"Ohh, Hiro, you think you can get married just because you want to drive that car?" Min-san asked.

"Not at all. I want both the car and the girl—wait, Min-san?"

The back door was open for who knew how long, and Min-san laid out some ramen onto the wooden desk, gave Hiro a felt slaps left and right, and stormed back to the kitchen in a huff.

"Owww..."

Hiro, collapsed on the ground, got up while covering his face. This guy just won't learn.

Tetsu-senpai ignored Hiro, asking me,

"So, what did Alice's sister want?"

"Eh? I don't know. That's their family business."

I played dumb, clumsily.

“I guess she’s here to investigate your personality, Vice Admiral Fujishima? Anyone will be scared to know that the assistant to her cute sister can fire off sixty wedding proposals in a second.”
“Didn’t you create that device to begin with?”

“Isn’t she here to bring Alice back?”

Tetsu-senpai blunt tone left me tone. I would say, he’s almost spot on.

“In that case, Alice won’t let her into the office.”

“You’re right. Maybe to borrow money?”

“She has a posh foreign car, and is a celebrity with her own fashion brand, you know?”

“Stop thinking in Tetsu’s standards.”

“Idiots, I’m not going to do something as small-time as borrowing money. I can’t return anyway, so I’ll just ask for money if I want it.” What are you being a tsundere for?”

While the trio continued their tirades, I asked,

“Erm, if Alice’s really taken away, what do we do?”

Tetsu-senpai, Major and Hiro looked over incredulous.

“Probably nothing.”

“Reunite at Yasukuni, I guess.”

“If her other relatives are young girls, I’ll have her introduce them.”

I felt really stupid for asking this question. But Tetsu-senpai continued,

“But speaking of which, without her around, it’s pointless to stay around.”

Everyone present looked up at the emergency staircase behind in unison.

“Because nobody will be giving us any cases, and my underground skills are useless.” Major too hissed.

“It’s really hard to imagine the days without Alice around.”

Hiro muttered with a faint smile.

I too couldn’t imagine. It’s been a short year and a half ever since I started loitering at ‘Ramen Hanamaru’, but I felt as though I’ve been here for a long time. Many have come and left, and even those close to me often had times when they left for a long time, but Alice was always around. She was always seated on the icy bed, filling her miniature body with intellect, wisdom, searching the world, seeking the truth. I couldn’t imagine a life without Alice.

“Whether or not that big sis is here for Alice, the decision comes down to Alice herself.”

Tetsu-senpai muttered.

Major and Hiro nodded.

Right. Alice had decided to remain forever.

Mari-san said their great uncle had fallen ill, and wanted to meet Alice once. It also appeared that she mentioned that he was in the same hospital as their dad—in other words, their dad was hospitalized earlier.

But so what? Alice didn’t want any involvement with the Sh-ionjis, and there was no need to meet. There wasn’t anything to talk about, right?”

I gently put the palm on my chest. Ever since I met Mari-san, I had this strange inexplicable feeling in my heart, but what's this uneasiness that's expanding little by little?

The cellphone in my phone suddenly vibrated.

"Since you're downstairs, come up to the office."

From the other end of the phone, Alice sounded displeased.

"You came and left yesterday, and I didn't get to ask something important. Explain all your involvement with nee-sama, what she said to you."

I sighed, got up, and went upstairs.

Later on, I was thoroughly interrogated by Alice, and played a penalty game called "Tell me everything in your conversation with Mari-san, without fail, and stayed till late before I got home. My older sister was already done showering, and was dressed in pajamas, drinking beer in the living room. Once she saw me enter, she pointed at a corner,

"Someone sent you a large package."

There were four large and flat paper boxes tied with ribbons. What's that? The delivery order clearly stated my name. I opened it, and found them all to be quality suits, shirts, neckties, and shoes, which left both my sister and I dumbfounded.

There was a little, fancy faint green envelop inside, and the message card inside was,

"Sorry that I can only get you prêt-à-porter. If possible, we'll get a master to tailor a suit for you next time."

Mari-san wrote it. My sister knelt next to me, looked back and forth between the clothes taken out of the box, and gave a long

sigh, saying,

“...What’s prêt-à-porter?”

Some fashion term? She asked.

“Ready to wear, basically. Even so, I see one suit is about hundreds of thousands.”

I can’t help but look at the ceiling. She’s saying that it’s rude of her not to get me a tailored suit? If I’m living as an ordinary high school student, I probably won’t ever have anyone apologize to me for this reason.

“What’s this, Narumi? What do you mean? Who wrote it to you? Try it. You never wore such a thing before, right?”

I probably had to talk about Mari-san or wear the suit if I wanted to calm my curious sister down. I could only scratch my nose and choose the latter.

“...Heh...” My sister marvelled.

It’s a suit with a complicated color contrast, like the colors of the sunset instantly burying the sky, unexpectedly matching on me. Even my sister was taken aback as she stumbled back, sizing me up and down.

“I wanted to make fun of you, but you’re pretty handsome ehre.”

“A fashion designer chose it.”

“Hm? You have such friends? Who?”

Ah shucks. I wore the suit because I didn’t want Mari-san to mention it, only to mess up. “It’s not good to crumple it.” So I excused myself, and hurriedly hid my room to change clothes. Wearing a suit really suffocated me.

Speaking of which, since she sent me such a precious gift, how shall I thank her the next time we meet? I have to repay her somehow, right? But she's living at the top floor of some super posh Aoyama mansion, and is a model and fashion designer. What can I give her?

Let's not think about it. I don't know if we'll meet again.

I left my room, and went down to the first floor. The lights outside the corridor lit up, and the door opened. I was immediately rooted to the spot, my back foot on the last step of the stairs. The silhouette in suit seemed two times smaller than what I had last remembered. How many months had I not seen my dad? He arched his back like a skinny lamb, looking really traffic. He removed his leather shoes, stepped onto the corridor, and his eyes flashed past my chest.

For a moment, our eyes met.

I immediately lowered my head, staring at the toes.

My dad's footsteps went to the other end. Following that was the sound of the door closing, along with the voice of my sister,

"Ah, dad. Have you eaten? Shall I cook something?"

Dad said something I couldn't really hear. I lifted my feet from the corridor, and turned to head up the stairs.

I often thought that he might not have any illness. During the period after mom's death, he might have been mentally worn out. Days passed, his conversations with sister became less frequent, and he hardly came home; I heard he wasted money looking for rental houses near the company. Since he's doing that, it means he's not really willing to see us, which might imply that he correctly understood the situation. If he hadn't known that someone like me existed at home, he wouldn't have 'ignored' me. It's uncomfortable saying this, but it's a lot better than before.

Even so, I won't do anything more for him.

I really want to get away from home, so I thought. I want to live alone, and earn a living, since I have no drive to study in college. This notion had me slightly regretful that I rejected Yondaime's kind intentions, and I was really sheepish about it.

✱

It seemed the words Mari-san left on the message card wasn't simply out of courtesy. Two days later, she invited me out to tailor some clothes. She was forceful even on the phone call, and I couldn't refuse. It's the first time in life that I was given a full tailor. Mari-san and the owner discussed the details using specialized jargon I couldn't really understand, and I shrank my neck, looking around the shop. On the thick rack were various fabric scattered closely, with a familiar scent.

"I'm told it'll be done a month later. Do look forward to it."

Mari-san said once we left the shop.

"Erm, the clothes you bought me should be pricey enough, and now you're getting me a tailored suit...I really don't know how to thank you..."

"Hm? I'm not doing this for your sake. I just want those near me to be dressed a little more decently."

"Is se..."

It's like having the urge to feed a stray cat, right?

"Also, it's necessary that I get a fine tailored suit, else it's not okay for you to go without wearing anything decently."

Shocked, I looked back at the door. That tailor's not good enough? I see, so that's why she bought me some prêt-à-porter. I

lowered my head, looking at this suit. So a month later, I'll be wearing a custom suit made by this suit, and get a better shop to tailor for me? Are we playing a video game here?

“Oh yes, Narumi-kun, how big is the walk-in closet of your room?”

“Why do you assume I have a walk-in closet in my room...” there's no such thing in a civilian's house.

“Eh...ahh, ahhh, I see, I guess?”

Those well off really don't know the suffering of the civilians. I couldn't help but think. It's refreshing to know that Alice never had this misconception.

“So, when building the house in Paris, the walk-in closet of your room has to be a little bigger. A boy's room often gets filled with other things.”

“Eh, erm...ehhh?”

Mari-san left this speechless me behind, and walked down Ginza high street to Nihonbashi. I hurried along, and caught up to her at the door of a Chinese restaurant. A waitress exited, and greeted us with a smile, leading us in.

We were seated at both sides of a round table, and Mari-san finished ordering while I was bewildered by the lavish interior decorations. Only after the waitress left did I manage to talk.

“Erm, wh-what did you just mean? My room?”

“What else? Can't have you and Yuuko share one, right?”

“N-not at all. That's not what I mean. Why does it end up with me moving along too?”

Mari-san suddenly looked deflated, which left me anxious.

“Narumi-kun, you’re Yuuko’s partner, no?”

“Y-yeah, well.”

“You’ve been with Yuuko all this while, right?”

“Always, hmmm...you can say so.”

“So if I bring you along, Yuuko too will come along, right?”

What kind of logic is this? Like that will work.

“I see that you aren’t good at rejecting others, so I have your clothes tailored and invited you out for a meal to ensure that you won’t really reject.”

“I know I really can’t reject others. Mind not explaining that?”

“Ahh, sorry, sorry.” Mari-san said with a smile, “But you’re not going to leave and return the clothes I sent you, right? You can’t not give any respect to a fine lady.”

A fine lady won’t try such underhanded means. But the truth is as she said, so I can only plop my lifted buttocks back onto the chair.

“But I really do have intentions to live with Yuuko. You understand.”

“I understand very well. But you seem to be mistaken. Alice isn’t going to change her mind because of what do you to me. I’m just an assistant she hires and pays, and I don’t have any influence on her.”

“Isn’t it great for three to live together? You may think about it.”

Mari-san ignored my protest completely, her eyes euphoric.

“Yuuko and I wake up in the morning, or wonder if we should get off the bed, and by then, you would have served us croissants and Café au lait. Once I’m done dressing up and combing Yuuko’s hair, you, having cleaned up the entire house, will send us off with polished shoes, dragging a cart and allowing Yuuko and me to enjoy the atmosphere of Champs-Élysées. Isn’t this great?”

“What’s great about that?” I’m just your slave.

“And I wish to have Yuuko give a new look to my children clothing brand.”

Mari-san said wistfully.

“My children clothing brand is a little obscure, and I wish to rename it as ‘Alice Shion’. Haven’t you all been calling Yuuko ‘Alice’, Narumi-kun? This should be fine, isn’t it?”

“Eh...” She’s no longer being doting on her little sister. However, that impatient look on Alice’s face left me somewhat pitiful of Mari-san.

“Of course, Yuuko will be the model. Now she’ll be able to live peacefully with us. Don’t you think of it as a good idea?”

“I don’t think Alice will be willing to stand in front of the cameras.”/

“So we’ll keep working every day, and once we return home, you will be before us with the meals cooked, Narumi-kun...”

Stop treating me as your manservant as and when you want it, okay?

“I always wanted to live a life with family next to me.”

I pursed my lips, glancing at her face. I had a feeling I had accidentally stumbled into the gentle aspects of her heart.

“I wish to protect Yuuko with my own strength, and be a real family member of hers. I don’t want any of them to touch her.”

I recalled the words Mari-san said when she first arrived at the office.

“...You said that the Shionjis will gather around her, right? What do you mean?”

“Exactly that. They do love to talk about that. Yuuko and I are able to inherit part of the Shionjis inheritance. However, there are people in the family who oppose, while others do try to use us. These people will appear once grandpa dies.”

I gulped bitterly. The stench in this matter was worse than I thought.

“Ahh, sorry.” Mari-san smiled, “The food will taste bad if we continue to keep talking. Let’s stop her.”

Saying that, she raised a wine glass, and took a sip.

“I’m fine with it.” I said. “I want to know more.”

Mari-san peered at my face. I felt it was difficult to convey myself through this cold expression, and added on,

“I can’t say that ‘things don’t involve me’ now. In that case, you can tell me everything, including Alice, and yourself.”

And the Shionjis.

Mari-san nodded slightly. So I thought she did, but she broke her silence only when the three servings of cold dishes were served, which made me tense.

“How much has Yuuko told you?”

Once the waitress left the room, Mari-san suddenly said,

“Just that her mother was a mistress.”

“I see.” Mari-san gave an awkward smile, “Let’s eat. It’s a lot easier to talk.”

I too agreed it’s a lot harder to talk with scowls facing each other, so I picked the dishes the dishes with my chopsticks. Typically, I would have found such dishes appetizing, but it felt like I was chewing on wax.

“Our mother was ‘a woman of Ginza’.”

Mari-san stared at the rectangular plate of cold dish, starting off,

“A club hostess. Our father was a frequent customer. Back then, he talked about how his marriage was failing, and mother comforted him, and had a relationship with him, bore a child. It’s common. That child however was me.”

Following that was some silence. Maybe it’s better to have some questions. So I spoke up, “So Mari-san, you always lived together with your mother?”

“Yes, initially.” Mari-san nodded. Looking at her relieved expression, it appeared she was hoping for me to ask, “Us mother and daughter lived in an apartment at Akasaka father bought, but since mother’s not someone capable to raising children, and left me with the maids. She would head out to work at night, and I was alone.”

“Mari-san, do you often...meet your father?”

“The last Friday every month, at our house. He doted on me... and I really looked forward to it every month. Mother’s a simple-minded person, and during our first encounter, she told me Mari, that’s your father’, even though I didn’t know how to call him papa.”

Mari-san gave a foolish leer.

“She has no delicacy at all, and probably never thought that she did anything bad. She even casually told the beautician or the boutique that she’s the mistress of the Shionjis. To be honest, I didn’t know how dad actually fell for her.”

So now she’s calling him ‘dad’ instead of ‘father’. Maybe it’s the emotions involved.

“Dad probably wanted to run away from reality, and would choose anyone for that matter. He doesn’t get along well with his wife, and the marriage isn’t very successful, while grandpa has been prompting them to give birth.”

“Erm, that means, a successor, right?”

“That’s the case.” Mari-san smiled weakly, “Yuuko did tell you that grandpa isn’t really our grandpa, right?”

“Ehh, great uncle, actually?”

“Yes, our grandmother’s older brother. Starting here, things do get a little complicated.”

Following that Mari-san started to introduce the current members of the Shioonjis from time to bottom. It really sounded complicated.

The head of the family, Shionji Mitsutoshi is the eldest of four siblings, and following him are Mikitsugu, Terumi and Gorou. Of course, that Gorou refers to Hiro’s master, Gorou-sensei.

Mitsutoshi’s wife died early, and bore no child. The third sibling, Terumi gave birth to her only son Mitsuki, and died early, so Mitsutoshi doted on Mitsuki’s own children as his own. As for Mikitsugu who’s alive and well, he implanted his siblings into important positions of the corporation, becoming the crucial member of the family.

Mitsutoshi was worried that the second sibling, Mikitsugu would try to become head of the family, and wanted Mitsuki to marry the eldest daughter of Mikitsugu. In other words, the cousin younger than him. Once that happens, Mikitsugu's children will all be Mitsuki's siblings, and Mitsuki would become the eldest son-in-law leading the Shionjis, that the pecking order is established. That would be what Mitsutoshi had planned.

"It's a little weird." What eldest son-in-law here?

"That's how the family work. So based to bloodlines, it's nauseating."

"There are still people living like it's the Sengoku period..."

"It's funny, isn't it? Dad too felt the same, and married an outsider as protest to his wife. She's from a well off family too, and grandpa never said anything about it."

"Erm...so, in other words, he doesn't want to marry his cousin, and got someone else to marry?"

"Yes. Naturally, such marriages won't last." Mari-san grimaced, "Anyway, dad was trying to escape grandpa's grasp. Of course, grandpa did try to take dad in as an adopted son, but dad tried various excuses, like he's not proficient enough at work, and nothing came of it...outcome-wise, it get worse."

"Why?"

"If dad's grandpa Mitsutoshi's son, the heir will be his only. The problem is that he isn't, that second great uncle Mikitsugu has a right to the inheritance."

"Ohh..."

I didn't know that. So that's how it was? This really—quite a spark.

“If he doesn’t want to inherit the Shionji family, can’t he just walk out like your great uncle Gorou? They’re on good terms, and it was great uncle who taught him all about partying. He also mentioned that mother was introduced to him at the club.”

Gorou-sensei escaped the Shionjis because he didn’t have the personality for him. Another possible big reason is that as the last child, he doesn’t care about the inheritance.

“So, he could have done what great uncle Gorou did, and wander around like nothing, but he didn’t. He might be too honest. They asked why he hasn’t had a child with his wife, and he said he will have to inherit the family business once he has. It’s funny, isn’t it? He bore a child with a mistress after saying this.”

Isn’t that child you? Things were getting complicated, so I interrupted, trying to ease the mood.

“Seems like you’ve been on really good terms with your father, since you do say such things yourself.”

Mari-san seemed tickled as she said,

“...Yes. Back then, even when mother went to work and never stayed at home, dad would come by, probably to see me. I really hoped to cook something for him, but my servants wouldn’t allow, and we always had takeout. This restaurant was one my father brought me to.”

Soup was served. Mari-san finally took a spoonful to drink.

“He brought me to many places, like the cinemas, Disneyland. Any places with family services. After that, dad went overseas to work, and snuck along.”

“Eh? You weren’t scolded?”

“Not at all. I wouldn’t just to look for him at the office. When dad’s working in the day, I would loiter around the hotel, go to

the arts galleries, or buy something to eat at the market.”

“That’s overseas, right? Alone?”

“Ahh, I could converse normally in English or French, and I do know some Italian. I didn’t know what my mother hoped for her daughter to be, but the nanny, the servants, the tutors were all Europeans.”

I sighed reluctantly. No ordinary person will learn three languages this way. This got me to think that yes, she’s really Alice’s older sister. The way her brain’s wired is really different.

“I was really happy back then, I really hoped I could continue living that life.”

Mari-san’s eyes and voice were cast to the distant past.

“But that’s impossible. It was an illicit relationship after all.”

She stopped here, but never raised her spoon. I had already cleared my plate, and had nothing to do, so I could only ask,

“Ehh...did the Shionjis know? About your mother?”

“It seemed they already knew from the beginning, since such things can’t be kept under wraps. It seemed grandpa had ordered for everyone to accept this relationship.”

“Why?”

From what I heard till this point, the old-fashioned Shionji Mitsutoshi should have been fuming since it was basically a betrayal of his expectations.

“I don’t know. Father however probably hoped this illicit relationship would lose him the right to take over the Shionjis, and didn’t care that it was exposed. Grandpa might have figured it out, and didn’t press the matter any further.”

I washed away the weird smell spreading in my mouth with oolong tea.

One side deliberately had a mistress so that he wouldn't be next in line, while the other deliberately ignored it to force him to inherit. Such a disgusting world they live in.

Suddenly, I had a thought. Did Gorou-sensei faked his death to break off all ties not only with the women in his life, but also to avoid getting involved with the inheritance mess?

Mari-san gave a depreciating smile, and continued,

“Soon after, mother gave birth to another child, Yuuko. Back then, the child was in bad shape, and might have endangered both mother and daughter, so dad mobilized the power of the Shionjis. He had to consider the Shionjis as a whole, and couldn't simply have her hospitalized in one managed by the family, so he requested for a friend's hospital to help, and invested lots of money, top-notch technology, and outstanding physicians.

In that case, Yondaime's guess was right on the mark.

“I heard a little from Alice.” I interrupted, for Mari-san pursed her wine-colored lips and remained silent. “She said her mother died soon after giving birth. Obstructed labour?”

“Hmm, well...hmmm.”

She was vague in her reply.

“Thus, Yuuko was raised in the residences of the Shionji. Grandpa had instructed everyone to never let her take a single step out of the room, so they locked her inside the room, and everything was settled by her servants. I was already out of the Shionjis then. They do allow me to see her once in a long while, and I have no idea of the life she lives. All I hear is that she's been toyng with the computer in her infancy. I guess she never inter-

acted with the Shionjis at all. The only ones to ever meet her were great uncle Gorou and me.”

Following that, silence rose like smoke.

Mari-san doused her lips with wine, and changed her tone,

“Yuuko left the Shionjis because of great uncle Gorou.”

She talked about how Gorou-sensei caused a commotion when he returned. I was increasingly baffled as I heard the story for while she could explain the many details, there were two points she merely glossed past.

First: her mother’s death.

I assumed she had obstructed labor due to poor health, but she was vague in her response, and after some vaguely passable sounds, she continued to the next point. Was there something more secretive?

Second: the reason why Alice was locked in the room.

It might be too weird that Alice was confined to her room ever since she was born, just because she’s the child of a mistress. Was it that it could damage the reputation of the Shionjis, that they did not want the outside world to know about her? This is pretty conflicting with how Mari-san can act freely. There should be another reason.

I couldn’t probe any deeper into these two questions. If she really had issues talking about it, and was waiting for me to ask, she wouldn’t have changed topics so quietly. That meant that she really didn’t want to talk about it.

Mari-san description of Gorou-sensei included his interactions with Alice.

“Did great uncle Gorou ever mention anything about this to

you?”

“He hardly mentions about home. Mostly about happy stuff anyway.”

“I see. Great uncle’s that kind of person anyway.” Mari-san smiled, “Great uncle only visits the Shionjis twice a year, and Yuuko seemed to have used this opportunity to ask him for help. Soon after, he followed her instructions, slipped into various corners of the mansion, and installed mechanisms capable to severing the security system. He’s the youngest child of the family, and wasn’t suspected.”

So on a certain day eighty years ago, Alice initiated her escape plan. She ensured that the lock of the house was disabled, and ran straight to the back door in the massive mansion.

“However, she was caught at the emergency staircase, and there was a huge ruckus in the house. Back then, I too was in the house, and immediately ran over to have a look. Grandpa was seething red.”

“Eh? How did she get away?”

Mari-san endured the pain as she scowled, remaining silent. Then, she exhaled, and continued,

“Dad...begged...for her to be let go.”

Her voice was increasingly softened.

The sudden silence from Mari-san had me understand very well that it wasn’t a simple matter. If Shionji Mitsutoshi was willing to let go just because his son asked for it, he would not have confined Alice to begin with; something else must have happened. This might be a taboo Mari-san didn’t want to mention.

I suddenly recalled the conversation between Alice and Mari-san. I remembered back then, Mari-san said that their grandfa-

ther was hospitalized at the same place as their father.

There were two facts to be inferred. Their father, Shionji Mitsuki was hospitalized before the head of the family, Shionji Mitsutoshi. Mari-san saying that meant that both Alice and her knew about it.

Ever since Alice ran away from home, she shouldn't have any ties with the Shionjis. However, she knew her father was hospitalized, so.

The reason that caused her father's hospitalization occurred before Alice ran away from home. Was it when Alice tried to escape the Shionjis, as Mari-san had said,

“But I'm really grateful that Yuuko was able to escape that household.”

Mari-san maintained a cheerful façade and tone, and I was unable to ask anything.

“It seems she's really happy now.”

Her smile was akin to one arriving at the port, unable to watch the ship depart. She then continued,

“She has so many good people surrounding her, the nice mother able to cook ramen and ice cream, and a cute obedient assistant who'll obey every order.”

“I'm not really obedient...” I grimaced.

“How envious. Me suddenly asking her to live with me must have frustrated her.”

I couldn't even lift my head.

For I couldn't think of anything other than to agree with her.

“I know this is a selfish wish on my part. I couldn’t do anything at the Shionjis. That incident must have caused Yuuko to really hate me.”

I gasped, gulping down the various thoughts I had. I had to say something.

“She doesn’t hate you.”

Mari-san looked over to me, her eyes appear ready to rain at any given moment. Those eyes were just like Alice’s, like the color of the late night.

“...Why’s that?”

“Alice isn’t someone who’ll hate because of that reason.”

The eyebrows twitched, and the murkiness in the eyes were wiped away.

“How nice a person you are, Narumi-kun. Are you consoling me?”

Feeling peeved, I answered,

“I’m not. I’m doing this to protect Alice’s honor. Also, such words can’t console you, since I’m no relative of you. As you can see, Alice just doesn’t want to get involved with you, because she fears trouble.”

“Such a nice person you are. I really love this aspect of yours.”

At this moment, Mari-san raised a glass, and gulped down the wine.

“I’m really envious of Yuuko.”

I didn't know how I was going to explain to Alice that I met Mari-san again, so I decided not to. The next day I opened the office door however, I was seen through by Alice, who was being abnormally sharp.

“Hmph. You met nee-sama again yesterday?”

“...Eh, eh?”

I was being too sheepish, and couldn't play dumb.

“How do you know?”

“Those clothes. Your pay isn't enough for them. Also, you don't know those are of nee-sama's brand.”

I couldn't help but look at my T-shirt. Mari-san had given me some casual wear, but for me, who had no fashion sense at all, I couldn't determine the difference between that and the usual cheap clothes I wear, so I came to the agency thinking that I wouldn't be seen through. What a failure.

“Erm, yeah, well...she bought them for me.”

“If you're going to leech off nee-sama, I'm firing you on the spot.”

“N-not at all, don't think too much about it. You should know that she's picky about what those around her wear, you know.”

“Whatever you two talked about, I don't want to live together with her. Get this clear with her.”

“Ahh, yeah...”

I recalled Mari-san's hollow eyes. If I were to convey those words to her, surely she would be despondent.

Seeing how that face resembling Alice would look so disap-

pointed, I too would feel heartbroken.

“At least you can get Mari-san to come by once in a while, right?”

Alice scowled,

“I’m too lazy to shoo her away, so do as you wish. Nee-sama treats me as a doll, always asking what I want to wear. A miniscule reason why I wanted to flee that house is because she’s too bothersome.”

“I see. So you wear the same clothes every day in defiance?”

“They aren’t the same!” Alice was so infuriated, her long black hair fluttered, “You do wash my clothes every day. How can you not differentiate between them? I have 23 different types of pajamas, the colors and teddy bear patterns are all different. Only the manufacturer is constant!”

I see. I had just known of this after being her assistant for a year and a half, and this really stunned me. If I were to say that pretty much all her clothes were the same, I probably would have countless empty cans pelted on me, so I swallowed my words.

“At the Shionjis, I wore lots of frilly clothing with excessive laces, so wearing these is a fresh change. The blue on this pajamas represents the color of the free sky.”

Why is the one cooped up at home all the time talking about the sky?

But I guessed the situation was as Mari-san had predicted. No matter how much she doted on her little sister, she would be deemed to be the one destroying Alice’s life. The latter’s probably pretty satisfied about being able to earn as a detective.

...Maybe?

“Hey, Alice.”

“What?” Alice casually asked as she reached her hand for the pile of red cans by the bedside.

“Do you feel happy?”

She fell into the gap between the bed and the wall, causing the pile of Dr. Pepper to fall like an avalanche, tumbling upon her black hair.

“Wh-what’s with that question out of a sudden?”

Alice crawled onto the bed, her hair ruffled about. Is that really a question that’ll cause her to fall?

“Eh, in other words, are you happy about your predicament now.”

Mari-san seems to feel that she’s happy, but what’s the reality?

“I never thought about it. Happy no not? Isn’t this something subjective that can be affected by the weather, alcohol divination, or even which shoelaces are tied?”

“I see. You’re right. Sorry for ask you such a weird question.”

This detective who deciphers the world with logic and intellect, and this question was utterly foolish to her.

“And you, capable of asking such foolish questions as and when you want to, you should be feeling happy yourself, right? I wish you can share some of that with me.”

“Stop with the sarcasm. If possible, I want you to live a happy life too.”

Alice’s face went as red as a prawn tossed into boiling water.

“Wh-what nonsense are you saying now?” She agitatedly slapped her long white kneesocks with both hands, “Y-you say you can make me...happy? Wh-what do you mean!”

“I’m trying to ask you this.” What do you think I mean?

“You’ve been really weird recently! First with the marriage certificate, and then cohabitation?”

Why mention them again? You’re the weird one. Please calm down already.

“Besides, you’re only 17, aren’t you? I don’t know my birthday, but I shouldn’t be any older than 16!”

“So you want me to wait a year?”

“Are you even listening?”

“Sorry sorry, just joking.” See how drastic her reaction was, I couldn’t help but tease her.

So I kept the empty cans Alice kept throwing at me, and remained in the philosophical thought if it’s really happiness. If yes, continuing this lifestyle might not be a bad thing after all.

✱

However, once the wheel of fate begins to move, it won’t stop. The beginning of the end was the message Alice sent me late at night.

“Go to Aster Tataricus at Shinjuku, 11am. Use the reception phone to say that you’re Fujishima Narumi, and someone will do the rest. It’s too much hassle to explain, so get the person there to tell you.”

I really wanted to ask Alice what's this about, but it's not the first time she gave me such a nonsensical order. Thus, I got onto the train without thinking too much, searched for the address Aster Tataricus on the internet, and found it located at the massive office building to the east exit of Shinjuku, so I had no worry of getting lost. The exterior was new and trendy, basically filled with the IT officers. I found a few familiar company names on the floor guide at the entrance; the Hong Kong triad company ZODIAC too was registered here.

I arrived at the 14th floor, where the glass doors at the elevator hall showed the logo 'Aster Tataricus'. I picked up the phone resting on the table, followed the instructions, and dialled the number. A cheerful lady's voice immediately responded..

"This is Fujishima Narumi. Erm, I think I have an appointment here at 11am..."

"Fujishima Narumi-sama? You will be shortly attended to."

It seemed things were as Alice had stated on the message, arranged by them. I felt relieved.

Anyway, what's it this time? Before the receptionist arrived, I observed the movements in the office through the glass doors. While wondering if I should research on this company on the internet, someone behind the door appeared. It was a young female staff member dressed in pantsuit.

She led me into the office. It was eerily quietly, and there didn't seem to be anyone inside. Few staff members? I never saw anyone else as she led me into the innermost door.

"Chairman, Fujishima-sam's here."

The staff member pressed the intercom button, saying this, and it left me a little tense. Chairman's room? Why's the security so tight? The metal doors seem so sturdy, a moving car can't

cause it to budge. There was a logo at the corner of the door, stating the security company. Looking at the doorbell and the card reader, it appeared it was electronically locked.

The little beacon on the intercom of the door suddenly showed a blue light. I had an impression on this. I might say I see something similar every day.

The door was electronically unlocked, and a metallic click followed. The staff member turned the door knob, and pushed the thick and heavy door aside. Cold air immediately spilled out of the gap, forcing me back.

“Welcome.”

The staff member ushered me in with a smile.

“Ah, is it too cold?” She looked a little gloomy. “It’s our chairman’s preference, and also, machinery is weak to heat...my apologies.”

In any case, I couldn’t just stand at the door and not enter. I stepped into the chairman’s room, gingerly breathing in the stinging air that seemed to be filled with tiny crystals, and looked around.

The space inside was rather barren. There was a short purple carpet laid on the floor, and the only furniture was the plain white desk far before me, as though it was a ship wreckage floating under the sunset. I could see the various buildings of Shinjuku through the full panelled glass walls behind.

“Don’t stand there. Do come over here.”

I couldn’t sense anyone around, but there was a voice, and it took me by surprise.

The chair turned against me spun around. Incline into it was a young man. He had the white robe draped upon his shoulder, his

headset microphone pushing down his messy hair. The eyes behind his frameless glasses were giving off a peaceful, dangerous glint, like a light luring moths in. Once our eyes met, I felt a chill all over.

“Did you not hear me? Do come here. I have no time to waste with you.”

The man said impatiently, and moved aside the leather covered book opened on his thighs to the desk.

It’s the Bible.

I endured the pain in my throat, swallowed the dry and frozen spit, and stepped on the purple carpet one step at a time. Who is this guy? Why did Alice get me to meet this man? The answers to these questions were waiting to burst out from my skin, flooding out.

I had a look at the desk. There were three monitors lined side by side. I widened my eyes. The monitors, the keyboards, and even the CPU were exactly the same as Alice’s.

“I heard that Mari-san met with you, so I’m a little curious about you. I wanted to meet you.”

The man pointed at the microphone, flatly stating,

“I am going to ask you a few questions, and once you’re done, go back immediately. First, do you know why Yuuko hired you?”

“Erm, first of all, I—”

“I’m the one asking the questions. Not you.”

I was speechless. What’s this? Is this how one should question? Also, it’s basic courtesy to remove the headset when talking to someone. What’s he getting at? Maybe I should stamp on this exalted looking table and turn to leave, but I couldn’t. For some

reason, I felt this man was really dangerous. Who's he? How did he know me? I had to get as many clues as possible.

"I don't know." I answered unwillingly. "I think it's because she couldn't find anyone else."

The man's eyes were staring right at mine, as though he could discern the slope on a green.

"Second question..." He continued to talk quietly with a voice no different from breathing, "Do you have the resolve to accept Yuuko no matter what she does, what she wants, and what situation she is in?"

What's this guy trying to ask? I thought. How am I supposed to answer this abstract question?"

"Not at all." I shrugged. "I really don't understand what you're trying to us. Alice always pushes me off the bed, but I try to resist every time. How am I supposed to accept her unconditionally?"

I spoke that with two-thirds spite and one-third humor. The man maintained the expression much colder than the room.

"What if it's not the bed, but the roof?"

"Then I have all the more reason to resist here!"

"Or I'll die! Isn't this nonsense!? Utterly ridiculous."

The man had both elbows resting on the table, a finger pushing his glasses up the bridge,

"Third question. How many ordinary people do you think is equivalent to Yuuko's personal worth?"

My mouth was agape like a dying goldfish. I felt regret, that I should have left quickly.

I took a deep breath, and tried to assess the situation. This guy's undoubtedly one of the Shionjis, and he knows Alice and Mari-san, calling them directly by name, and they did resemble each other physically. I guess he impersonated Alice in the message sent to me.

That's all I could tell, and I still couldn't figure out his objectives.

"Don't ask any stupid questions. Answer me in units of a hundred million people."

The man weighed Alice's life on a scale against the lives of others. A hundred million people? Is he mad? I finally understood that my stomach was filled with rage.

So I sighed, and said,

"What do you mean now? Oh, I haven't answered your question? Just take it that I haven't. There's loads of people who talk about the value of life, but life itself has no tangible value. The concept of value can only be used in something that can be exchanged. Is it possible to give life, to store life in the pocket? Are you going to keep the lives of a hundred million and let yourself revive a hundred million times? The value of life, in other words, is just to exaggerate other things. Please don't say that already. Ask what you really want to ask, or I can't answer."

I converted all the frustration I had vented in my heart into words, and smacked him verbally on the face. Finally, I managed to incite a change in his expression. It really felt good. Thinking calmly about it, I was just spouting nonsense, but I did feel that I got revenge.

However, the man quickly showed a stoic face again, saying,

"Fourth question. Do you wish to work in my company?"

“Huh?”

Shocked, I blurted out awkwardly.

“I’ll guarantee an annual salary of 12 million Yen.”

Why mention this out of a sudden? Since he refused to pass the ball back and intend to bat away, I had no choice but to answer.

“No matter what you say, I refuse.”

“Do explain.” The man raised his index finger, saying this.”

“I don’t think I’ll like someone like you. I don’t like to work under those I don’t like.”

“I can try to have you like me. You don’t want that?”

This left me speechless for quite a while. Come and try, I couldn’t say. Again, I realized that he’s really one of the Shionjis. There’s a common theme between him, Alice, Gorou-sensei and Mari-san, that they really have the magical power to lure others in, no matter the intent. He’ll try to get me to like him? Maybe he can. This left me all the more restless.

“Better not.”

Finally, I eked out this reply.

“A pity then.”

He answered with practically no regret. I really couldn’t understand why he answered ‘a pity’. What’s this? I probably thought for the fiftieth time. What’s the deal with this guy? Calling me over for his own amusement?

“The last question.” The man said, “If Yuuko is to vanish from your life, what will you do?”

This should be the easiest of the five questions. People will vanish one day, and this is a specific, realistic question. This time, I couldn't answer anything. I couldn't even say 'I don't know'.

I did toss out the exact same question to Tetsu-senpai, Hiro and Major just yesterday.

I knew way. My instincts told me that this man in white robes will take Alice away from me. And I couldn't do anything except to lower my head and shake it.

Following that, the man snorted softly, as though he had given up. He nodded,

“I'm done with questions.”

He said, and spun his chair away from me. I tried to close in, but once I took the first step, I retreated. I didn't know what I was trying to do.

He then glanced aside at me, saying,

“I can answer a question of yours.”

I lifted my head in shock.

Is he thanking me? No-no way, he's not that kind of person. Is he probing me?

What shall I ask? What I need to know is, is this guy friend or foe? What can he do? What does he want to do to Alice or me? Did something happen with the Shionjis?

...It seemed none of the questions were specific. I had one chance, I needed to find a question able to pinpoint this man—

After some thinking, I spoke up,

“Alice likes hard rock music, and I think that's because you've

been listening to Mr. Big?”

The man widened his eyes, and blinked a few eyes. The glass membrane of a mask on his face shattered silently. He didn't show any obvious smile or rage, but there was certainly some emotion. It's not just me, for he finally removed his headphones, and draped it over his neck.

“Did you say that randomly? Or did you hear me listening?”

I felt relieved. The door's finally opened, so I felt.

“Didn't you say that was the last question you would ask?”

It's really not good to spite someone when it's uncertain if we could converse properly, but I just couldn't help myself. He nonchalantly answered,

“One extra question means that I'm starting to respect you.”

He sounded really calm. I couldn't infer if he was joking, or for real.

“I did hear that. It's 'Lost in America', right?”

Once I said the name, he removed the headphones, and left it on the desk. I couldn't hear anything, for he might have paused it when he removed it from his ears.

“Your deduction is correct. I recommended it to Yuuko. The naïve Western hard rock of the 80s is really helpful to computer work.”

This answer was close to what I expected, yet it drove me into despair.

There's no doubt this man was the teacher who granted Alice the wings called computer.

Before I left, the man handed me a thick card made of plastic, with the words,

“Aster Tataricus LLC. Chief Executive Officer, Shionji Keiichi.”

While the subway was shaking about, I searched for relevant information to Aster Tataricus’ stocks.

It’s founded by a genius programmer, and already at the top of the net security industry for enterprises. It’s a company that trades large network media, and already has legs within the financial sector...

If I had investigated thoroughly beforehand, I could have prepared myself mentally. Though regretful about this, I didn’t feel I was wrong in any way.

I looked down at the namecard, slipped it into my pocket, and leaned sideways onto the train door.

Alright, how do I explain this to Alice? I can’t hide this from her, and I can’t just say what I want, for I’ll be scolded badly. I didn’t do my checks, and was bluffed by the fake message.

Seriously, why am I involved in such trouble? What’s with the Shionjis? Just let Alice and me go already, okay? You guys haven’t contacted her for years, have you? Is it now so chaotic because that old man is hospitalized?”

The phone in my phone suddenly vibrated. I took it out, and found that it was Alice.

“Hurry over now! Where have you been!?”

Alice seemed to be on the verge of tears. I shrank my neck back, and scanned the carriage with few passengers, saying,

“I’m on the train. Going over now. What now?”

“A lot of people from my old home are here. Lawyers, doctors. They’re all blocking the office door. Help me think of a way out!”

Doctor? Lawyer?

The train broadcast announced the next station. “I’ll hurry over.” Saying that, I hung up.

It was noon when I arrived at ‘Hanamaru’, but there were many people outside the shop. Min-san was shaking the Chinese wok about as she shouted,

“Sorry. Looks like there’s a lot of weird ones at Alice’s room, but I’m really busy here. Please check on them!”

There was no time to answer, and I ran up the emergency stairs. There were 3 men in coats before the room 308.

“Milady! Please open the door! The chairman’s really critically ill here. He wants to see you no matter what!”

One really plump middle aged man was crawling at the door, pleading. I hunched my body down on the staircase, looking at them. Doctor and lawyer, I guess. I see they really look the part. The one causing a ruckus was the lawyer, and the frail middle aged bespectacled man should be the doctor. The youngest looking hunk in his early thirties should be the bodyguard or the driver, maybe?

The phone in my pocket vibrated again,

“Hop in through the window of room 309. I’m keeping the door open for 5 seconds!”

Alice’s sudden shout got me jumping up the stairs, and

through the door. The trio found me grabbing the door handle of room 309, and I hastily slipped through the door, slammed it shut, and locked it.

The room next to the detective agency was a machine room set below zero degrees Celsius. The dark single room was filled with metal racks stacked towards the ceiling, CPUs crammed inside, and the wires slithered through the gaps. I had been here twice or thrice, and just moving through the room was tense for me. I then pulled aside the cooling curtain, opened the window, and hopped from the ceiling to room 308 by the side. Alice then opened the window and let me in.

“What’s the situation now?”

“I should be the one asking!” Alice grabbed my shoulders, appearing to be on the verge of tears. The door of the office kept echoing. Looking through the peephole, it appeared the trio remained.

“Please, Milady, come out.”

The plump middle-aged man kept begging incessantly. I scowled, and left the room.

“He’s the Shionjis’ legal advisor. I met him once there.”

Alice told me once we returned to the bedroom.

“The bespectacled one is one of the doctors who would occasionally check of them. Why they are here, what happens to grandpa is none of my best. Do they think I’ll open the door with a smile if they charge in like this?”

I sighed, and looked over at the corridor. Mari-san did say that the Shionjis would gather around Alice, but I never expected to be so stupid and direct. What are they thinking? Alice already had cameras installed. It’s impossible for her to foolishly open the

door now.

“They’re too noisy out there. Might as well call Tetsu over.”

Alice gave a call to Tetsu-senpai, but nobody picked up, so she sent a text over in frustration.

“Seriously, why aren’t you guys picking up the call at this important moment? You had me call you four times until you answered.”

“Ahh, sorry. Back then, I was...”

I should mention about the guy in white clothes. So I told myself.

“I went to Shinkuku. A company called Aster Tataricus, which you should know...right?”

Alice widened her eyes. Ahh, I was further convinced that the message was faked.

“Y-you went to that company> Why?”

I showed her the message. At that moment, Alice seemed to have understood everything.

“Th-this is a fake. He wanted to get you out!”

“Yeah, that should be the case.”

Alice then seemed to have thought of something as she approached me,

“Did he, give you anything?”

“Eh? No, nothing—ahh, a namecard.”

“A namecard!? Show me.”

I was shocked by how anxious Alice was, but I took out the namecard in my pocket and handed it to her. She snatched it, scanned it, and bent it over and over again. Then she tore it in half, and threw it into the trashbin.

“...Alice? Wh-hat—”

“We’ve been had. It’s a remote control.”

“Eh?”

I looked towards the trash can, and found a metallic object embedded in the severed namecard. There’s such a thin remote control around? Control what?

“He led you over to give you this. He wants to switch off my air conditioning. Right, I let you into the machinerom...all hanging. Overloaded?”

Alice looked vexed as she gritted her teeth, tapping at the keyboard. Once the system was activated, the six monitors quickly showed an excessive spiel of green text. I didn’t know what was going on, and worse, I didn’t know the reason for the despair shown on Alice’s face.

“E-erm, what does that mean? What happens if the air conditioning fails?”

“The CPU will overheat. I don’t know what exactly will happen, but that man might be able to use this chance—”

Alice’s voice suddenly stopped, and I took couldn’t say anything as I blankly scanned the monitors. They were all filled with the face of that white clothed man.

“It’s been a while, Yuuko.”

A voice came from the speakers, and Alice’s fingers on the keyboard lost all strength,

“Kei nii-sama...”

“Software-wise, you managed to pass, but I did warn you to be more careful with the hardware. Using a home air conditioning for a machine room is really unspeakable.”

I, left speechless by this, once again looked towards the name-card remote in the trashcan, and shuttered. He warmed the air-conditioning in the machine room, and while the computer was overheated, he hacked through the while security couldn't work. Did he look for me just to invite him in?

“There should be people outside waiting for you. Get ready to go out, or I'll reveal all information about you.”

Alice bit her lips so forcefully, blood was seeping. She glared at the white clothed man and the cold expressions. Soon after however, she dropped her shoulders, and stood up.

It was the first time I saw Alice lose as a hacker.

CHAPTER THREE

We arrived at a large general hospital facing Sumida River.

Once we entered the back door, we found the chapel hall to the right, featuring a cross. It's most likely a Catholic hospital. The Rolls-Royce Phantom passed the parking lots, but did not enter, instead arriving at the courtyard. It appeared this hospital had been renovated multiple times, and the newer, white seven storeyed building appeared modern, yet there was an old looking grey, four storeyed building in the middle of the courtyard.

It was the hospital Yondaime told me of, and Alice often came by.

It seemed ironic, I felt. It's the place where the Shionjis bore their illegitimate children, and invested heavily to elevate the personnel and facilities, yet it ended becoming their flagship hospital, where both the Head and the successor were hospitalized at.

Alice scowled as she shrank into the seat next to me, wearing a light, onion-colored dress with white frills at the collar, headband and sleeves, resembling a doll there. She was hugging the teddy bear in her right hand, grabbing a miniature PC in a case with her left.

“Milady, we have arrived. Everyone is waiting for you.”

The legal advisor leaned over from the co-driver seat, glared at me with hostility, and turned away.

To be honest, I was really surprised when Alice insisted that I come along. The doctor and doctor had insisted that no outsiders were to be involved, “I’m not going if Narumi’s not coming along” but Alice forced them to abide.

Is it really a terrifying thing for her to appear before the Shionjis? So I asked myself. I couldn't help in any way, but she wants me to be by her side?

There were a few cars parked in the courtyard, each of them black and sparkling, large continental cars. The Rolls-Royce we rode on was parked by the side. The chauffeur got off first to open the door on my side. The hunks in suits gathered by the other cars looked towards us. They were probably chauffeurs, all wearing white gloves, probably waiting for their masters.

I had Alice get off first, and narrowed my eyes to look at the hazy day in the season of flowers. There was an uneasiness coagulating inside my heart. What future awaits us? Why are they looking for Alice?

No matter my thoughts, the white robed man used such means to get Alice to the hospital, and surely it's not simply because he wanted the grandfather to see her one last time.

There was some distance to the hospital building, but Alice stopped in her tracks, and muttered,

"This hospital is as annoying as before. Stained glass, cross..."

The windows on the first level were covered with stained glass depicting the Archangel Gabriel and the Holy Mother Maria, and there was a little cross on the door.

"That side's the gynaecology section, so they had the Holy Birth depicted here. Bad taste, isn't it? I find it dumb every time."

"Milady, you have to come by for checks more often. You have a weaker constitution, and you should be more careful..."

The doctor caught up to us, and humbly noted,

"Hmph. You doctors simply wish to use my body as an experiment for your drugs, no?"

“From a scholarly viewpoint, we have interests in your constitution, notably the genetics. Your health however is our true worry—”

“—Yuuko!”

I looked towards the hospital door where the voice came from. A white shirted woman came running over with her long hair flowing. It's Mari-san.

“Yo-you really came by? Why...”

She ran by us, and immediately grabbed Alice's hands, asking with a croak. She might have been take away if the lawyer and doctor wasn't present. Alice shoved aside her sister's hand, and turned her head aside, noting angrily,

“Kei nii-sama threatened me.”

“Keiichi-san...?”

Mari-san looked back and forth between Alice and me.

Following that were footsteps, and a silhouette in white immediately appeared at the hospital entrance. Shionji Keiichi had his hands in the pockets of his white robes as he strode towards us.

“...You came along too?”

He immediately glared at me, saying this. Alice immediately hid behind me. Even though I lost in rigor, I glared back at his bespectacled eyes, nodding.

“I don't know what you guys will do to Alice if she's to come alone.”

“It doesn't matter whether you come by or not.”

Shionji Keiichi then turned his eyes towards Alice,

“You acted quickly, Yuuko. I thought you would try to dither a little further. Are you really this relieved to have him as your escort?”

“Enough with that nonsense.” Alice turned her eyes aside, pouting, “The computers you ruined are the tools I use for business, Kei nii-sama. I can’t play with them like before. I just want to return me my administrative rights as soon as possible.”

“Seeing that you’re here is enough. I’ve already restored your access rights.”

Alice widened her eyes, frisked out the computer, and tapped at the keyboard. Soon after, she heaved a sigh of relief.

“...How’s father doing?” Alice asked.

“You’re not asking about the Head?” Shionji Keiichi tilted his head.

“What happens to that old man doesn’t matter.”

“Everyone’s getting you here because it does. You won’t say such a thing if you know what the will entails?”

Shionji Keiichi turned around, and said,

“Mitsuki-san showed no change. He remains the same.”

I wordlessly watched the white silhouette return to the hospital, and Alice was next to me, pursing her lips. Mari-san tried talking to us several times, but hesitated, and gulped.

The lawyer, chauffeur, and the doctors from the other cars surrounded us,

“Now then, please come here, Milady.” The lawyer’s voice nudged Alice from the back.

“Everyone’s waiting, so do greet them first.” The doctor and lawyer said, but no matter how they tried to coax, Alice insisted on seeing her father first. Thus, with the company of Mari-san and Shionji Keiichi, we went to the sixth floor of the hospital.

Mari-san slid her card at the reader of the ward door, and the double automatic doors were slowly sucked into the wall.

It’s a lonely looking ward room. The space double the size of a classroom contained a bed by the wall, along with several machines and drips lying by the side. The curtains were bundled up, and the large sky could be seen. There were seasonal flowers on the bedside table and the window side rack. Even so, I could sense the scent of death permeating heavily in this entire room, like a thick fog.

There was a man lying motionlessly on the bed.

I don’t know how he looked like, for the artificial ventilation mask had covered his face completely. All I could see was a slender, thin neck, and a strangely protruding throat knot.

“Dad, how are you...Yuuko’s here.”

Mari-san approached the bedside, saying this, but the closed eyes remained unmoved. Alice waited at the door, and immediately pinched the teddy bear forcefully, biting her lips so hard they went pale. I glanced at her sidelong face, and then back at the bed.

All I could think of was a decrepit expression. A living corpse.

Alice adamantly moved forward, and I too followed her little footsteps. Shionji Keiichi hurried right behind us, and went to the other side of the bed. Mari-san might have visited him often, for she skilfully wiped the patient’s neck and armpits, and changed the water in the vase.

We finally reached the bedside.

I could not see any life on the parched skin beneath the bandages, masks and circulatory tubes.

“...Dad.”

Alice placed the teddy bear by her mouth, muttering this much.

She was a detective who could manipulate millions of word, and could dissect, analyze and revert each and every case. Yet these were the only words she could eke out.

I observed Mari-san's face discreetly, followed by Shionji Keiichi. Both their eyes were staring at the body on the bed that was still warm, Shionji Mitsuki's.

“Want to touch his chest? You can feel his heart beating.”

Mari-san suggested.

She's basically saying that the other parts were numb to the fact that he's alive. Alice bit her lips, shaking her head to refuse..

I couldn't help but remember the time Ayaka was hospitalized. This was much worse than back then, since she could still breathe by herself back then.

“We're just extending his lifespan for no reason; he's been unconscious for eight years.”

Saying this, Shionji Keiichi turned to look at the doctor.

“If the doctors had deemed him brain dead from the beginning, Mitsuki-san won't have to atone by living, and the Shionjis won't have to gather for this particularly troublesome issue.”

“Ho-how’s that allowed? Please, enough with those jokes, Kei-ichi-san.”

The doctor kept shaking his head. I froze up as I listened to these words.

Eight years. Alice’s dad, Shionji Mitsuki was forced to live for eight years, despite his condition not improving in the slightest.

Something really terrible must have happened.

Alice ran away from home, and her father’s in a vegetable state. Both happened eight years ago. It matched, and I guess it’s not a coincidence. Doubts kept swirling in my mind, choking me, and I wanted to ask, but couldn’t. However, this knot might have received Alice through our hands.

“Dad...jumped from the third floor of the house. Carrying me.”

Alice said dejectedly. Mari-san gave a bitter look, and averted her eyes.

“Dad used himself as a pincushion to help me to escape, and I was unhurt. Grandpa passed out spouting white foam, and the entire family broke into chaos, so I had a chance to escape. Dad attracted attention for my sake.”

“Enough, Yuuko.”Mari-san shook her head again.

“Dad’s basically killed by me.”

I could do nothing other than to hold Alice’s hand.

With the doctor prompting us, we left Shionji Mitsuki’s room. While taking the elevator back to the first floor, Alice, Mari-san and Shionji Keiichinever said a single word. I felt the presence of death seeping into my skin, and my palms kept rubbing at my jeans.

After that, I was brought to a luxurious guest room, one that didn't seem to be part of the hospital. The round teak tables had ample spaces between them, resting upon the silk carpeted floor. The large porcelain vases by the window contained red, white and yellow orchids, the artistic chandeliers formed by countless silver rings, not lacking in class despite the simplicity

A dozen or so people were seated, some chatting with each other, some merely spacing out to look at the grey skies outside the window, some shoving tobacco into their nostrils, some fiddling with their phones. All of them were dressed in formal clothing, either black or navy blue. Once Alice and I followed Mari-san in, the talkers stopped, glaring heinously at us.

“...Hey, who's that boy?”

The middle-aged man seated at the nearby door.

“Keiichi-san, what are you thinking? Why did you bring an outsider over?”

A woman of about fifty years old at that table was dressed in Japanese clothing, and she looked towards Shionji Keiichi with disdain.

“I brought him here, stepmother.”

Alice's words caused the majority present to shrivel.

“Narumi's my assistant. If he isn't allowed to come along, I'll be going back.”

The lady, whom Alice called stepmother, was probably Shionji Mitsuki's wife. She stated coldly,

“Yuuko, this is a family meeting, not something an unrelated outsider can listen to..”

“Do oblige, Kyouka-san.”

Shionji Keiichi spoke with a colder voice,

“It’s pointless to argue about this. I can assure you that he can keep secrets”

“Eh, but...” “So the stray cat has brought the stray dog back.” “So that’s why I said not to bring her back.” “Like we got a choice. She’s an implicated party.”

There was a commotion from all involved. I guess this is what they mean by sitting on a needle bed. I lowered my head and looked at myself for wearing an open jacket and jeans, thinking that I should have worn the suit Mari-san gave me.

“Speaking of bringing outsiders back, aren’t you the same too, Kyouka-san?”

Shionji Keiichi said, looking back at the woman, Shionji Kyouka, along with the men at her table, who too frowned in unison.

“What outsiders?” “How rude.”

“So my father and older brother are outsiders now?” Shionji Kyouka quietly retorted.

“Aren’t those not Shionjis outsiders?” Shionji Keiichi answered.

“I am a Shionji after all.” Kyouka’s voice was seething. So my father and brother are basically relatives of the Shionjis.”

“You moved out for twenty years, and now you have the cheek to say that you’re a Shionji?”

The young man by the window taunted, and Shionji Kyouka glared over agitatedly.

“It’s to be expected that she would move out though.” The man being Kyouka’s brother said, “it’s Mitsuki-san’s who’s unfilial to

Kyouka. She's the victim."

"You could have divorced him.?"

"Are you trying to ruin the rest of Kyouka's life!?"

The topic had veered in a completely different direction, aflame for a completely different reason. Both sides seemed to have long forgotten about me as I listened to that ugly dispute, trying my best to sort out this complicated situation. It seemed the wife left the Shionjis for many years, probably because she discovered that her husband had an affair, and remained at her own house. However, she did not demand a divorce, and once the inheritance matter came up, she brought her family along for this family meeting. No wonder it's a toxic mood here. I suddenly felt nauseous.

When the lawyer had enough, and wanted to say something, a white haired old man standing by the window side turned around, and bellowed,

"Who cares about a few outstiders? Just settle this annoying meeting and get it done with."

A few people looked over to him tentatively, and I too narrowed my eyes at the face of the old man.

I could see that it was Gorou-sensei's brother. His dignified look resembled Gorou-sensei, albeit with the kindness on his face drawn away.

"...If you say so, I have no objections, uncle..."

The wife sighed, and turned to the back

"What do you say now, everyone?"

I again scanned the crowd, and was taken aback. It was obvious who was a non-Shionj. The Shionjis had the mysterious allure

of a poisonous flower, and only the table Shionji Kyouka was seated at did not have such a dangerous presence.

Everyone not a Shionji is an outsider.

“Have we figured out that man’s background? It’s not easy to get him to shut up. Let him stay around. It’s not going to affect much.”

A man said as he looked at him, looking frustrated as he had an elbow on the table. He appeared to be about forty, and really resembled Shionji Keiichi. However, he might be too young to be called the father. He’s probably an older brother with quite the age gap. The bystanders exchanged looks, and nodded unwillingly.

They agreed to let me remain, but it drove me further into despair. If they could chase me away, I could have brought Alice along and went back. I didn’t want to breathe in this toxic atmosphere any second longer.

The old man by the window side pulled a chair over, and sat down, nodding towards us.

“Then, I’ll start off by explaining the Head’s situation.”

The bespectacled doctor waiting behind me said with trepidation, saying,

“Currently, the Head’s liver, kidney and heart vitals are really low, and his unconscious. It’s likely that—”

“Mind just saying how many days does he have left, Sonomura-sensei?” A young man who had been sneering the entire time asked. The doctor called Sonomura deliberately coughed a few times, and said,

“...Might be today or tomorrow.”

“He’s leaving a lot of trouble even when dying. Why doesn’t he clean up his mess before dying?”

The old man muttered.

Nobody tried to stop him, and everyone gave awkward looks.

“He was still alive and kicking just a few days ago.” “Didn’t he go to Germany for a business meeting last month?”

“Never thought he would fall now...” “I thought he’ll live to a hundred.”

I could hear such conversations.

I firmly felt once again that this wasn’t where I should be. I’m in a quagmire. Even though they agreed for me to be around, they probably would say this to a brat they never met, and never bothered with me, because they’re this way, or that they didn’t care since the Head’s death would signify an inheritance crisis?

“Since Nakatani-sensei is here, I suppose it’s time to announce the will, right?”

Shionji Kyouka coldly cast a glare to the lawyer by the side. Nakatani-sensei took a handkerchief to wipe away the sweat under his chin, and spoke up, “Erm, I have been sworn to secrecy, so it’s inconvenient.”

“Let’s respect the pointless words then.” Shionji Keiichi said, “We’ll make our own guesses, and you can remain quiet while hearing our guesses, Nakatani-sensei. We might get some subjective takes from your reactions, but isn’t that against your obligation to keep a secret?”

After hearing Shionji Keiichi say this, Nakatani-sensei nodded with a heavy look. This really is a disgusting family meeting.

“If the mistress’ children are here, what’s there to guess about

the will?”

The young man sarcastically noted,

“After what happened to Mitsuki-san, the Head firmly believed he’ll recover one day. That’s why the will probably will work out that way, that it’ll be all given to Mitsuki-san?”

Nakatani-sensei then replied with an unflinching face, his head twitching about.

“Eh, yes...as a professional, I will like to share some knowledge with everyone. The law dictates that the inheritor shouldn’t involve nieces and nephews, so in the Head’s case, the inheritor will be the siblings. Furthermore, if the legal inheritors are dead, the inheritor’s children will take over. Eh, basically, if the Head had specified that his sister, Terumi-san to take over, his son, Mitsuki-san will be the designated legal heir. The outcome might remain the same, but, hmm...”

The lawyer pretended to brief them on additional knowledge, but in fact, it was no different from answering yes.

“Fool, he’s no different from a dead man now.” The Old man cursed. I could feel Mari-san jolting next to me. The old man glared at her, and continued, “We can give him all the money, but what about the stocks and fixed assets? This impacts the livelihood of the employees.”

“Grandfather, have you discussed this with the Head? You’re a legal inheritor too, right?”

Shionji Keiichi asked the white haired old man, and the old man shook his head.

“Nope. That brother never mentioned this all these years.”

The lawyer then spoke up nervously,

“I wish to share more legal knowledge , as a legal professional. There are no special hierarchies between the siblings and any third party. In other words, even if the Head had specified in the will that Terumi-sama is to receive all of it, Mikitsugu-sama, you have no right to ask for a share...so, erm...”

He’s basically revealing the contents of the will. It appeared the old man was the Head’s brother, Shionji Mikitsugu. Seeing how his expression did not change, it seemed he was already mentally prepared for this.

“Kyouka, did Mitsuki not leave...such documents?”

This time, it’s the middle-aged man who spoke up. While it infuriated me, he’s humane enough to not specify the word “will”.

“No.” Shionji Kyouka shook her head. “But I don’t think it’s that big of an issue. Just in case, I can talk to the person involved . There shouldn’t be any need for this meeting.”

“That’ll be too late.” Someone at a table far away said, “The problem now is that nobody prepared for the Head’s will any earlier. It’s a miracle that Mitsuki-san can live till this point. Who knows when he’ll die?”

After that, nobody spoke for a long while, and everyone present looked over this side. Mari-san lowered her eyes, while Alice glared back at the dozen of relatives.

I gulped the sour saliva. Bloodline, money, and desire mixed together in a complete mess. My mind couldn’t comprehend in time. I couldn’t figure out wanted what with Alice.

However, I could be certain of something. This whole thing is stupid.

“This whole thing is stupid.”

Alice heard the voice in my heart, saying this,

“I don’t want a grain of rice, let alone the inheritance. You can fight over it until you’re all swollen. Can I go back now? I don’t want to waste my precious time on this meeting.”

Mari-san too insisted,

“No matter how dad is, I don’t want it either. Please, just let us go already.”

“Hmm～? Aren’t you visiting your dad obediently every week to emphasize your relationship, offer some yokan?”

Somebody’s question left Mari-san seething red, and she was about to take a step forward, only to be pulled on the hem by Alice. She changed her mind, and said,

“...I’ll willingly give up my claim. All I want is for dad...”

Mari-san lowered her head, her voice being ridiculously soft.

“You may.” Shionji Kyouka coldly said, “Smart decision, nothing to dispute.”

“And I got Yuuko here because I don’t want to see this happen.”

Shionji Keiichi turned to us, and say,

“If Mitsuki-san is to die, rather than have Kyouka-san take over everything, it’s better for our side if Mari-san and Yuuko are to take the inheritance.”

Alice scowled,

“...So are you saying that if I inherit this, you can manipulate me all you want?”

“Aren’t you already under my control now?”

I felt a chill in my heart. He’s way too direct. This family is full of straight shooters, but Shionji Keiichi is the bluntest of them all.

“I can’t accept.”

Interrupting this time was the man at the same table as Shionji Kyouka. Given how she spoke, he’s probably her older brother, and it was obvious he wasn’t a Shionji, for his eyes were filled with hostility.

“Speaking of which, are these two really Mitsuki’s daughter? Even if they do consider him their father, ain’t their mother a hostess? It’s not strange if other men are involved.”

“Have them do a DNA validation.”

Shionji Kyouka coldly stated.

“If they aren’t related by blood, we can cancel their legal rights through the non-blood related clause.”

“But Yuuko and I are both dad’s daughters ! ”Mari-san turned pale, her voice shaking in agitation, “It doesn’t matter whether you recognize us as such. We’ll just live however we want.”

“Hmph. It’ll be a lot easier if you two give up your rights. We won’t complain too much about this.”

Shionji Kyouka’s brother noted with spite. At a seat far away, an old man’s hoarse voice came,

“No, you have to inherit.”

The Head’s younger brother, Shionji Mikitsugu, spoke up.

“Even if they’re born out of wedlock, they’re Shionjis. It’s much better than handing it over to outside relatives.”

The more things got clearer, the more I felt like vomiting, my senses almost severing.

The Head of the Shionji corporation, Shionji Mitsutoshi intended to leave all his inheritance to his nephew Mitsuki, but Mitsuki remains in a vegetative state, and nobody knew how much longer he would live. If Alice and the others gave up on the inheritance, most of the Shionji fortunes will be granted to Mitsuki's wife Kyouka and her relatives; in other words, to parties outside the Shionjis. The term 'external relatives' might seem archaic, but it was probably created for such situations. The problem is that Mitsuki had two children with his mistress. If the court determines that these two have the right to inherit Mitsuki's inheritance, that will mean half of the original fortune will be left.

Alice and Mari-san were embroiled in an ugly war between relatives, and were almost crushed.

"Great uncle Mikitsugu, you have no right to say this now. Yuuko and I will decide on this matter."

Mari-san's voice was so tense, she could practically snap at any given moment.

"It's not an issue of right." Shionji Keiichi stated coldly, "We can use more forceful means on you if needed."

"Or what else are you going to do?" Mari-san glared at Keiichi-san, "Are you going to try to kill me, just as you did to my mother?"

The atmosphere immediately froze up. I too stared blankly at Mari-san's face.

I could feel a sudden sharp pain on the back of my hand. Alice's fingernails was stabbing into my flesh, her eyes too widened in shock as she stared at her older sister.

Killed?

A few of us were as shocked as us, looking back and forth between Mari-san and Shionji Keiichi, muttering. It's those 'outer relatives'.

First to speak up was Shionji Kyouka,

"I heard that she killed herself.."

"You... !" Mari-san hollered with tears in her eyes, "You broke up my mother and I, and said something so vicious, and now... now..."

Without batting an eyelid Shionji Kyouka interrupted Mari-san's agitated wail,

"All I did was to teach her some basic logic and etiquette."

Then, she turned towards Shionji Keiichi,

"I don't know what happened after that. What did you people know?"

"Nothing. It's just Mari-san and her own imagination." Shionji Keiichi shrugged in an exaggerated manner, "How can we possibly do something so stupid and inefficient? If she had obeyed us, there would be a lot more —"

While Alice gritted her teeth, intending to storm forth to lash out, Sonomura-sensei put down the phone by his ear, saying,

"it appears the Head has woken up."

The ones allowed to enter Shionji Mitsutoshi's room, other than the doctor, were,

Shionji Kyouka, Shionji Mikitsugu, the lawyer Nakatani.

And, Alice.

The other relatives were gathered on the corridor, waiting with bated breath. I remained by Mari-san's side, lying on the wall, staring at the white ward door.

"This is one reason why I had Yuuko come over."

Shionji Keiichi said as he approached us. I glared at him, and turned to Mari-san. Her lower eyelids were red and swollen. Surely she resisted the urge to cry for far to you.

"You're meaning that the Head might be overjoyed to see his long awaited grand niece, and change the will?"

I deliberately emphasized, making sure all present could hear. I was thoroughly infuriated, but nobody was agitated, and nobody denied it. Such a bunch of disgusting people. Now I know how Shionji Mitsuki felt, why he helped Alice escape even though he had to jump from the third level.

"That's most ideal." Shionji Keiichi said, "But given the state of the Head, the chances are slim. It's enough that he gets to talk to her. That means he admits to Yuuko being one of the Shionjis, and voices objecting her return to the Shionjis will be smaller."

I couldn't help but look back at him. So does he want the inheritance, and on top of that, bring Alice back to the Shionjis?

The relatives started chatting away again

"What will Kyouka-san do this time..."

"Is it really alright to leave it to grandfather?"

"Whose side is Nakatani-sensei on?"

"The Head wants to see that brat....grandparents dote more on their grandchildren, but that's not his real grandchildren."

Enough with that bloodline nonsense. You want to argue about it, go to the other end of the world, alright? That was all I felt of them, and I reproached myself. I should have brought Alice along and moved to Paris with Mari-san. Serving them croissants every day is way better than staying here.

The door suddenly opened, and Alice, first out of the room, looked on with a blank face, which shoved me. Everyone waiting at the door stopped chattering as they looked over like hungry wolves. Following Alice were Shionji Kyouka, the doctors, and the others.

“The Head fell asleep again.”

Sonomura-sensei said with a pained look

“What did the Head say?” “Did he say anything?”

“We still can’t see him?”

The relatives gathered around the doctor. Shionji Kyouka appeared to be shielding the doctor as she said forcefully, “Didn’t the doctor say that the Head’s asleep? He’s in no condition to discuss serious matters.”

“The Head...might have been stabilized. Maybe he’ll wake up soon after.”

Sonomura-sensei hid behind Shionji Kyouka, and said timidly.

That day, as we didn’t know when Shionji Mitsutoshi would awaken, everyone present stayed at the hospital. At this point, I was not surprised that nobody, not even the doctors, cared about the fate of the patient.

I was about to notify my sister that I would be home late, but my phone was snatched away from me.

“It’s a sensitive issue. It’ll be troublesome if you are to acci-

dently spread the news.”

Shionji Keiichi said.

He brought me to a place deep in the first level, to the end room of a corridor. It was obvious that it was a place hardly anyone else. There were stacks of round tables and folded rectangular tables, with dust everywhere. The observation window on the door was really big, and there were grids on it. These were transparent grids, not translucent, and I could clearly see the inside. Also, the room could be locked from the outside, and I had a bad feeling about it.

“...This isn’t an ordinary ward, right?”

“Right. This is an isolation ward for those with severe mental illnesses, and nobody uses it now. Do relax, the basic amenities are all available.”

I sighed,

“Scared I’ll go outside and cause a ruckus?”

“What else, you think?”

At that moment, I really had the urge to deliver a punch. Seeing how there were other young Shionji men behind him, I decided against it.

“What about Alice?”

“Yuuko will be living in a ward room on the same level as the Head. If the Head wakes up, she’ll be there immediately.”

“You can lock me up, but let me say something to Alice first.”

I tried to ask, not hoping for anything, but I never expected Shionji Keiichi to immediately bring Alice before me.

“...What is this room...”

It's no wonder Alice would frown upon seeing this. This room really is weird. The walls are painted brown, probably to calm the patient, but it certainly didn't make it seem like a patient ward, and I couldn't calm down. Also, there were no right angles in the corners of the room, round angles instead. Did they hope for the patient's heart to be rounded, without any edge? No way?

“This is jail, I'll telling Kei nii-sama ! ” Alice turned towards the corridor.

Through the observation window on the wall, I could see Shionji Keiichi leaning on the wall, waiting.

“it's fine, I'm already prepared for this.” I said as I sat on the bed.

Alice glared at the grids on the door , only to drop her shoulders and sit next to me, looking resentful as she buried her chin in the head of her teddy bear.

“I-in that case, I'm not going to apologize to you!”

She suddenly spat loathingly, and caused me to blink.

“It's my fault that you got involved in this mess, but don't you think that I'll feel guilty in the slightest ! ”

What kind of a tantrum is this?

“You want to apologize? Stop it, I'll feel disgusted.”

“Uuu...”

Alice flattened the teddy body on her already flat chest.

“What do you mean? You're saying that I don't know basic courtesy? At least I do show my thanks when it's needed ! ”

Yes, I'm referring to basic courtesy, but I don't really care now.

"Anyway, I never thought it's a room that can be locked from the outside. The Shionjis really love to lock people up.."

I wanted to make a joke, but I messed up. Alice hugged the teddy bear tightly, and did not say anything.

"...Ah...Sorry for getting you to remember something unpleasant."

"It's fine." Alice whispered, "I did say that I don't really care about that, because the ones really unfortunate isn't me, but the people around me. It looks like both mom and dad had bad ends..."

"So you just...knew about your mother?"

Alice nodded.

"My eyes can see everything and anything, and I should be able to know, but I did not want to know about my mother. The debts I owe have piled up, and yet when I saw dad lying in a pool of blood, I didn't try to save him, not even reach my hand out. I just ran. I wasn't scared of going back, I was scared of why dad that, so I ran."

I nodded silently. Having heard this, I still did not understand what Alice was talking about. What does she want to tell me by prying her own wound? What does she mean by debts?

"Even if grandpa dies, the debt I bear won't disappear. All it does is that the day to settle this debt has to arrive sooner. It's only today that I get to know this. It's stupid, isn't it? I thought I could have left it aside, distance myself from it, and pretend that nothing happened. Actually, I should have come along on my own will...while grandpa's still able to talk normally."

I recalled the blank on Alice's face as she left Shionji Mitsu-

toshi's room, and felt a little worried, so I asked.

“...What did your grandfather say to you?”

Alice lowered her eyebrows, and answered,

“Nothing. It seems like he knows who I am, just that he can't react. That's what the doctor said, but I'm a little suspicious. It just feels like he's keeping his eyes open, but he's unable to see anything. He can't talk, let alone hold a conversation. I have lots of things to say, lots of things to clarify.”

A little hand grabbed the front paw of the bear.

“I should have negotiated with them earlier and break off all relations. I don't want the Shionjis to interfere with my life again. I kept trying to run away, but they ended up catching me instead. It's ironic, isn't it?”

“Well, who wants to go back to a home where nobody knows what everyone's thinking. How did they abuse you?”

“So I say, I wasn't abused. I just can't stand those people, but I don't hate them. Dad jumped on his own will, and while mother seemed to be bullied by them, I didn't know the actual situation, and couldn't remember how they looked. There's no reason for me to hate them because of her.

“Eh...you're right, but didn't you escape because you don't stand it?”

Alice shook head.

“I left that house because when I'm locked in that room, there's a limit to how much knowledge I can gain. As for why I never went back, I understand now. What am I scared of? Not grandpa, and not the annoying, stupid Shionjis...”

Saying till this point, she paused, her arms holding down the

chest of her light onion-colored dress.

“I’m scared of knowing myself.”

The eyes as blue as the deep sea looked up.

“Why do you think I was locked for so many years after I was born?”

I stared at Alice’s sidelong face, saying,

“Maybe it’s because, erm...your mom...and dad have that relationship that shouldn’t be made public.”

“It’s not because I’m born out of wedlock. This doesn’t work out. Isn’t nee-sama living normally as part of the Shionjis?”

I once had the same doubts too. Then, Alice dwelled deeper.

“I do have other mysteries that aren’t explained either. Nee-sama was taken back to the Shionjis after she grew up, and I was treated as part of the Shionjis after I was born.”

“What’s weird about that?”

“Basically, after my parents’ affair was revealed, they never broke up, and even had a second child, me. Also, the Shionjis invested money to have me born. Isn’t this weird/”

“Ahhh, well, yes...that is weird.”

Looking at the family meeting, I could imagine how cruelly mistresses were treated. The Shionjis disposition, along with how they treated Alice immediately after she was born; something doesn’t add up about them.

“I’ve always felt that something’s amiss. I’m not just doubting. I even deduced the truth, how everything came about. It’s just that...I don’t dare to investigate. It’s strange, isn’t it? I hate igno-

rance, and kept opening all the windows of the world, yet I close my eyes when it comes to myself. If I want to fight the name of Shionji, I'll have to start by first knowing myself."

Alice mocked herself, saying,

"And then, right when I open my eyes, grandpa's about to take the truth into his grave."

"Mari-san should know something, right?"

"Of course. But right now, I can't ask nee-sama about that. Ever since then, she collapsed onto the bed, and remains sad until now."

I recalled Mari-san's anguished look when she shrieked.

The Shionjis killed her mother...

I didn't know what exactly happened, but I could be certain that while her mother left quite an impression, there was a scar that wouldn't be healed. She's just like me; while I didn't really feel it's bad to talk about my mother once in a while, I continued to lament her demise.

"I should talk with nee-sama a little more. I don't know how she carried those painful memories alone. We only met a few times, and just want to wade around in the water, having no interest in the reality next to us...without mother around, I can't understand how nee-sama felt at all."

"It's normal, isn't it? Who can really understand how others feel?"

Alice blinked.

"You do understand somewhat, don't you? Didn't your mother die early?"

I shrugged, and answered.

“Mari-san’s situation is completely different from mine. Mine died in a car accident, and there’s no point hating anyone. The truck driver I could have hated died in that car accident...” For a moment, I really didn’t know how to describe it, “Yes...” I responded. “I don’t understand her predicament at all.”

“But you’ll at least feel sad for her, right?”

Having asked that, Alice lowered her eyes.

“Sorry for asking you such a rude question. I really don’t know how it feels.”

I had a thought, and said,

“It’s really sad...it feels like something’s different. Well, it’s like removing the stopper of a bathtub, lots of things just flowing away, and finally nothing remains. My sister said that I never shed a single tear, but I had no impression of it.”

“I see...so that’s it.”

Alice pressed her hand on the chest of her light onion colored dress, looking down as she stared at it. Is she seeing if there’s a hole in her heart?

“If I too lose someone important, I don’t know how I’ll react. I can’t imagine at all.”

“...Eh, Alice, you’re, well, your father...”

A bloody imagery on the floor kept appearing in my mind, and I swallowed what I was about to say. He managed to remain alive, but he remained unconscious for eight years, and was no different from being dead. Alice even witnessed it. She felt more shocked than I did, right?

“I told you I don’t know.”

Alice pouted.

“Dad and I meet once a month at most, and even after coming to my room, he won’t say a few words, just watching me writing programming scripts in surprise. I didn’t know what kind of person he is, just that he’ll often give me books. I do like Tipken’s works because he gave me her entire collection.”

Her words contained some warmth.

“But that’s all he did, send books. He never talked about what I felt after reading them, what I wanted to read. I guess he didn’t know how to talk to me. I’m in a particularly unique situation, and part of it was caused by him.”

Alice said, her fingertips sliding down the hem of her dress as she seemed to be reminiscing the past.

“When dad carried me and jumped from the third floor, I was shocked, and I didn’t know what was going on. I didn’t know why dad was willing to sacrifice this much for me, so I did as he told me to. I left him behind, and ran.”

Why, you ask? Because he’s your dad. He loves you..

But I couldn’t say anything. I’m not the detective. I had neither right nor ability to speak for the dead.

Alice flattened her dress, and muttered,

“Nee-sama might hate me.”

“Why’s that?”

“She loves dad. After hearing how she visits dad every week, I probably thought that it was I who caused dad to end up that way.”

I couldn't help but sigh. I remembered Mari-san saying that too, that her little sister would have hated her. These two sisters really are so similar in this aspect.

"That's not your—"

I felt that I shouldn't have said so, and kept quiet.

That's her starting point. This NEET detective once talked about how much misfortune there was on this world, and that she had no ability to stop it. Such a noble ideal imprisoned Alice in that icy room, and she kept chewing over her futility, becoming an omnipotent seeker. Since she couldn't break away from the pain, she would at least light a lamp in the darkness of ignorance, and watch until the very end.

"It's my fault." She muttered, "If I'm omnipotent, dad wouldn't have ended up this way. It's my fault."

"Is it just an issue of possibility?"

"Yes. I did mention this to you before."

"But aren't you lying?"

Alice widened her eyes as she stared at me.

"...What did I lie to you about?"

"You said you're not a Saint, and that you never really wanted to save others, right?"

"Never thought that you'll remember about that, but so?"

"But you're lying to me. You really want to save others, right?"

Some speckles of light flickered in Alice's eyes, almost shattering.

“...Wh-what are you saying?”

“Actually, you wanted to save your father, and even the mother you never met.”

Alice got increasingly red as she listened, her neck shivering as she listened to me.

“What, you think you know me well!?”

“I knew that.”

I looked back at Alice’s eyes that were about to flood,

“I’ve been beside you for a year and a half. I don’t understand you at all. I fail as an assistant if I don’t understand that, I think.”

My words caused Alice to lift her legs up, push the doll onto the bed, bury her face into it, and roll about on the bedsheet.

She’s always manipulating words, running through the labyrinth of logic face, and breaking through the obstacles, terrified of being lost. Thinking about it, it’s simple. If she’s scared of ignorance, she could be a scholar, adventurer, or news reporter. Why be a detective?

Because she wanted to save those on the brink of despair. It’s just that simple

“What are you being gleeful for!” Alice yelled, her face flushed. Her long black hair standing up in a mess. “You think of yourself as a companion? And what do you mean? Why am I the one talking? Didn’t you call me here for some reason?”

“Eh?”

I was flabbergasted.

“Didn’t you get Kei nii-sama to call me here? Isn’t it because

you want me to help you contact your family!?”

“Nope. I just thought I should see if you’re alright. I thought you’ll be scared to be alone.”

Alice’s face went beetroot. Is there a need to be this angry?

“Wh-who’s scared!? The room they gave me is a lot better than yours. There’s a large hotel like suite room. The only problem is that nee-sama’s living with me.”

“I see, then, good. Sorry, I might be scared myself.”

Alice shoved Lilicu into my face.

“Then think of her as me and try to endure this loneliness ! You might be locked here for a long time ! ”

Alice hopped off the bed, and hurried to the door, showing at Shionji Keiichi through the grid window.

“Kei nii-sama, I’m done ! Let me out right now ! ”

After she left, her fuming voice echoed on the corridor.

“How long are you going to keep us locked here!?”

“I haven’t gotten everything confirmed—”

The door closed, shutting off Shionji Keiichi’s words.

I laid down on the bed. The doll on my chest still had some lingering warmth from Alice.

Even when night came, I couldn’t sleep. Nobody brought food to me. Luckily, I wasn’t hungry, so it wasn’t a problem. I spent the rest of the time lying on the bed, killing time by staring at the pitch dark ceiling.

It's eerily quiet here. It's a hospital, but it's way too ridiculous to think that there was no sound to be heard once night beckoned. After thinking for a moment, I guess it's because this building was for the Shionji's use, and there were only two patients, Mitsutoshi and Mitsuki. Nobody saw any medical staff, because only a few were needed to watch over them.

Sonomura-sensei said that Alice's great uncle, Shionji Mitsutoshi, might not live past tomorrow. Once he does, there's one less reason for Alice to be here. Can she and I regain our freedom? But they did just confine a child for several years after she's born. They couldn't possibly let me go that easily.

This sudden imagination had me shivering.

Are they intending to...kill me to shut me up?

I recalled the dark, scorched eyes beneath Shionji Keiichi's glasses. Maybe he might do such a thing without batting an eyelid.

No no no, calm down first. I've been a detective assistant for a year and a half, and learned a lot from the dark side of society. One thing I learned is that erasing a person's existence completely is impossible. Killing someone to hide a secret will create a larger secret that's difficult to hide. Also, it's impossible to erase all the tracks that have been left behind.

Kill me just to hide a family secret? Impossible...right?

I started to think that it was stupid of me to try and console myself, so I flipped around. I felt that my head was numb and hot. I took in too much information today, overloaded. I felt tired, and the information and memories that are not so important will seep out from my eyes. All I remembered were the words Alice and Mari-san said to me.

Their mom's dead, and their dad's a living corpse.

Given this definition alone, the Shionji sisters might be similar to me in predicament. The pain they thoroughly felt is something I can never experience fully.

I don't know, and I can't imagine. Who can understand the thoughts of others anyway?

While being alone in my room, I reflected upon my conversation with Alice, and put myself in her shoes.

Why couldn't I empathize?

Because my mother died in a car accident? There wasn't any malice, just dumb luck involved in her death. It's nothing compared to the madness of love and hatred involved with Shionji Mitsuki and his mistress.

N-no, that's not it. So I answered myself.

Basically put, I just couldn't accept my mother's death. The way dad escaped was way too pitiful, and I didn't realize that I too was running away from reality. After mother died, my father and I never conversed. Is it just his problem? Maybe, just as he had ignored my existence, I too had deemed him a ghost.

Ahh, in this sense, I think I understand how Alice feels.

Realizing myself is something really terrifying. Knowing that is the same as death

I tried to force myself to sleep for a moment, only to hear something heavy behind dragged over, followed by some fleeting footsteps. I sat up, saw the other side of the grid glass, and found someone standing under the dim blueish white light.

“...Narumi-kun, you awake?”

It's the voice of a woman. I got off the bed, and went towards the door. A silhouette wearing white robes, with black hair cover-

ing the shoulders, was at the observation window, the night lights in the backdrop.

“Mari-san? What is it?”

“I heard nobody brought food for you ...so I got you some.”

“Ah, sorry. Thanks.”

I tried searching for the lights on the wall, but I couldn't. I fumbled with the door handle, but it was locked.

“Looks like I can't switch on the lights here.” I sighed, “Is it possible to open the door there?”

“Looks like it can only be opened with a card.”

Mari-san opened what seemed like a newspaper hole at the bottom of the door, and slid in a tray of food. While thinking that I was really in prison, I accepted it.

“Sorry for putting you through this.”

She said behind the thick door.

“Well, it's not something you should apologize for.”

Unlike Alice, Mari-san does actually apologize. I suddenly had a stupid thought.

“I'll try to get you back home as soon as possible, and I'll figure out a way so that they won't cause you trouble.”

“Sounds good. How about your side? They're threatening you...”

She lowered her head, her expression merging into the darkness,

“I don’t think anything will happen. I’m a public figure, so they won’t probably do anything. I’ll just have to endure some troubles and do as I’m told.”

“Well, I guess, sorta.”

Speaking of which, she didn’t have to resist. If her family wants her to inherit it, she could have. The outer relatives might go to court over this, but the ones telling her to inherit should deal with this. Once news of the inheritance crisis appear on the tabloids, the Marie Shion might be damaged, but minimally.

“But Yuuko might not simply obliged. She might be taken away.

“Just to ask.” I coughed twice, and continued, “What I say next might add on to your burden, so I apologize. If Alice gives up on the inheritance, her share will belong to you, right? This is pointless to the Shionjis? They just don’t want the inheritance to be taken fully by that wife. Alice says that she doesn’t mind, but I think the Shionjis are pretty twisted. I really hope that they’ll stop harassing her.”

I could hear Mari-san giggling behind the grid.

“Narumi-kun, you see...” her words trailed off in the white mist, “it does seem...you’re really worried about Yuuko,”

She sounded really helpless, and it shook me.

“But that’s pretty unlikely. Yuuko might be taken back to the Shionjis.”

W-why do you say that?”

“Keiichi-san doesn’t want the inheritance. Yuuko’s the disciple groomed by him, and he probably wants her to remain by his side.”

I recalled Shionji Keiichi luring me over to that office building in Shinjuku, and that we had that conversation in the building. I could tell that he had a special obsession with Alice, and Alice's terrified of him. No, not scared of him, more like revered. I could still remember her face when the detective agency system was hacked, and she saw that man's filled filling all the monitors.

“But he has no right to take other people back. Alice can earn money on her own, and maintain her own living.”

“Narumi-kun, you—”

The black hair fluttered in the darkness. Mari-san turned her eyes away, sounding skeptical as she moved away.

“You're not, erm...you don't want to leave Yuuko...right?”

“Eh, it's not my call, right?”

“Then what is it about?”

I gulped. Seriously, I didn't know why's she asking me this. That's an issue between you sisters. What does that have to do with me?

Under the dim looks, I could see her eyebrows sparkling.

“Well, I don't want to leave her. We've been detective and assistant for so long. Seriously...I—”

For a moment, I was speechless. I really didn't know how to describe this. I couldn't find any suitable words to express how important Alice was to me.

“—Sorry, I can't really put it well. Anyway, she's an important partner to me.”

“I-see.”

I could feel some tears in her voice,

“I think Yuuko too—”

“...What?”

“Yuuko will surely...”

The words slowly tailed off in the darkness.

I blinked a few times, and stared at her face hidden in the darkness. Something’s not right. Did she discuss something with Alice beforehand?

“Erm, Mari-san—”

Right when I was about to question further, a shrill alarm rang above us, along with loud footsteps, sounds of metal crashing, and people shouting,

“—Hurry” “—What?”

“—Got it, I’ll be there—” “Move faster ! ”

She and I looked up at the ceiling in unison. It’s late. Did something happen?

“I’ll go upstairs to have a look.”

“Ah, okay.”

She immediately turned around, the flowing black hair covered my eyes. The silhouette on the grid window grills got smaller, and soon, she vanished.

Once again, I looked towards the ceiling. I knew it was pointless, but I tried budging the door several times before I gave up and returned to the bed.

The doctor said that the Head Mitsutoshi would live to either today or tomorrow. So that moment's finally here? What's written on the will exactly? If the inheritance is to be handed over to Mikitsugu, Alice and Mari-san will be able to live peaceful lives. While the wife's family might be infuriated by this, but that has nothing to do with us...

I did hear angry, seething roars, and my back jolted from the bed.

“—You guys did this, right?” “What are you trying to imply—?”

“Please calm down. This place is—” “Utterly preposterous. Doing this—”

What are they arguing about? In the darkness, I pricked my ears.

“—Just gone, and you people are—”

“You're kidding me!” “Enough with the jokes.”

I hopped off the bed. What happened? Did the wife's family charge over to the Head's room?

It's impossible for me to return to sleep, so I paced around before the bed. There's a likely reason that they're arguing because of Alice, and I didn't know if she'll be fine...I was really frustrated that I was unable to exit the room, and I started to see if the observation window could be open, trying to reach my hand through the opening where Mari-san delivered the tray of food, but it was a waste of time.

Soon after, I rid myself of that notion, and laid back onto the bed, pressing the teddy bear onto my tummy as I spaced out and looked at the clock to kill the time.

An hour later, Shionji Keiichi came over,

“You never left this place, right?”

He asked from the observation window. I got up from the bed, and put up a front as I sighed,

“How can I possibly get out here? Didn’t you lock the door? Anyway, I don’t know what they’re arguing about—”

“Did Mari-san come by?”

“...Eh?”

“Please answer my question. A nurse said that an hour ago, she met Mari-san on the corridor, and asked what she was doing. She said she brought something for you to eat. Is this true? Did she come here?”

“...Y-yeah?”

Just ask already. Do you need to look so restless? I thought as I nodded way.

“Mari-san did come by to deliver some food. We chatted a bit, and then there was noise upstairs. Mari-san said she’s going upstairs to have a look, and left.”

“What time?”

I had a look at the watch. I had nothing to do, and kept looking at the watch out of boredom, so I remembered the time really well.”

“1.45am...or so.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah...why are you so particular about this time? What happened upstairs?”

“What was the commotion like?”

“Many came by yelling—ah, some seemed to be quarrelling.”

“Got it. What you said matches the situation when we discovered this matter.”

Shionji Keiichi folded his arms beyond the window. It was dark, and I couldn't see very well, but he's definitely not looking pleased.

Discovered? What?”

“This means that Mari-san and Yuuko weren't together when he was found.”

“Huh? Erm, yeah, that's right. She's here. Anyway, what do you mean 'discovered'? Mind telling me what's going on?”

I didn't get an answer, and instead, I heard something sharp and heavy rubbing. I gulped, and ran to the window to have a look, seeing that Shionji Keiichi was pushing the long tables piled on the floor to the wall. So that's meant to block the door to prevent me from getting out even when the door's unlocked? Doesn't matter, just open up. I hastily turned the doorknob.

The door opened, and Shionji Keiichi reached a hand out to grab my wrist.

“Please come along.”

He brought me to a certain car parked neatly in the parking lot, and shoved me into the co-driver seat without saying a word.

“E-erm?”

Shionji Keiichi sat in the driver seat, buckled up silently, and started the engine.

“W-wait a moment. Where are we going?”

He tossed something onto my thighs. It’s a cellphone, my cellphone that was taken from me before I was locked inside the ward room.

“For you. Buckle up.”

“Wait, what about Alice?”

Shionji Keiichi said nothing as he stepped on the pedal and drove off. The sudden acceleration caused me to shrivel on the co-driver seat, and the bear plushie I brought along rolled at my feet.

The car exited Harumi-dori, passed several car lights on the relatively empty road, and accelerated. The building lights in the night quickly vanished, and I again turned to the back, finding that the hospital was no longer to be seen.

I swallowed my grumbles back, and buckled in frustration as I glared at the reflection of Shionji Keiichi’s face on the windshield, asking,

“Please do explain what is going on.”

But even so, there was no answer. We entered Uchibori-dori, and the darkness around the royal residence appeared to our right, causing the silence to feel much heavier.

“—Personally, I do like you.”

Once we arrived at a red light, Shionji Keiichi muttered, and I looked to his sidelong face with scepticism.

“So please think of this as goodwill on my part. If you wish for a stable life, it’s better to go home without knowing anything, and never get involved with anyone called Shionji again.”

“...Are you kidding me?”

“I’m dead serious. Knowing the truth is the same as death.”

The red light turned green, and the car drove off again. The car was filled with the engine noise and a strange silence isolated from the outside world.

Knowing the truth is the same as death. Is it this person too who first told Alice these words?

But either way,

“A stable life’s no different from crap.”

I spat out at the dashboard.

“Just tell me what’s going on. What happened to Alice?”

Shionji Keiichi sighed, either out of reluctance, or this pitiful me.

The car stopped at the next traffic light, and he spoke with a stiff voice,

“Shionji Mitsuki is dead.”

I stared at his sidelong face.

“...Is there such a need for this ruckus? Isn’t everyone mentally prepared for this? The doctor did say that he might die today and tomorrow—”

I swallowed my words, jogged my memory, and repeated that name,

“—**Mitsuki?**”

“Yes.”

“Not the Head...but Alice’s father?”

“Yes. The Head Mitsutoshi is still alive. Do you know what that means?”

I remained the frail body lying on the hospital bed. Alice’s father died before the old Head, and the significance of it slowly seeped into my mind.

“...So that means the designated inheritance is lost.”

“That’s how it is. If the will is really as Nakatani-sensei hinted, the will is invalid, and all the inheritance of the Shionjis will be taken over by my grandfather, Shionji Mikitsugu.”

Before I knew it, the car accelerated, and I did not realize when the traffic lights changed to green. I gulped, and asked,

“So...his wife, and the in-laws will be really troubled. That’s why they’re causing a ruckus.”

“If that’s just the case, I wouldn’t have taken you away.”

I frowned, and looked towards where he was looking. The night and lights of the stars were shown outside the windshield, phasing towards the back in an irregular manner. My body temperature trickled along with them, and I was feeling terribly chilly.

“Mitsuki-san’s artificial ventilation was removed.”

Those words too took my breath away.

“—He was murdered.”

CHAPTER FOUR

It felt like I was seeing the agency without Alice.

There was the cold bed, and dozens of doll eyes staring at the void its master disappeared from. The power to the six monitors remained shut, and the air conditioning continued blowing cold air for no reason.

I sat by the large Mogagdid Bear, and reached my hand onto the bed, towards the indentations right above it. Of course, there wasn't any physical warmth or anything left behind. I calmed down, and the various stupid thoughts came lunging in my mind. I shook my head to rid myself of them, pick up the empty cans, removed them, and brought the scattered pajamas to the washing machine, but I had no strength to activate it.

I knelt by the wall, and searched the national news on my phone. It seemed news of Shionji Mitsuki's death was yet to be revealed. Not a day had passed, and he's not particularly famous in the financial world, so it won't be reported that early.

The fact of his death will most likely disappear with the wind. Shionji Keiichi, who was maintained in a vegetative state before dying for real, would be stored in a coffin and cremated. He once said that he did not want this to become a criminal case, that everything would be settled in the hospital.

A criminal case.

A murder, Alice's father was murdered.

But so what? Why did they have to suspect Alice?

The doorbell rang. I immediately ran to the corridor, and opened the door.

“Alice?”

Ayaka, standing outside the door, widened her eyes and jolted back.

“Ah...sorry.” I lowered my eyes awkwardly, having thought Alice had returned. There’s no way she would have pressed the doorbell to her own house..

“What about Alice? She’s not around?”

Ayaka entered the agency, and looked into the bedroom.

“I heard from Min-san that a few people came by yesterday, and took her away...”

I nodded, and weakly returned to sit on the bed. Ayaka picked up the dolls scattered on the floor, and put them onto the bed. The capybara, frog, otters looked on worriedly at me, just like Ayaka.

She didn’t ask me what happened, just waiting for me to speak up. This kindness left me more unbearable, and I ended up looking between my legs, unable to say anything.

“Alice’s isn’t around? This really is a rare chance!”

Ayaka pretended to sound cheery, saying,

“I’m going to clean this place up!”

She then dug out the towels and dirty socks stuck between the gap between the bed, yapping away as she wiped the dust behind the computer rack with a cloth. Seeing Ayaka act this way, I gradually sensed that Alice was really no longer around, so I checked the pipes to see if they contained any residue, and did any mundane tasks to distract myself.

“That’s how it is, Fukushima-kun!”

Ayaka was cleaning the room when she opened the fridge, saying,

“Let’s drink some of Alice’s Dr. Pepper while she’s not around! She can’t tell if there are two fewer cans, right?”

“Didn’t you say it’s not nice?”

“Drinking what’s given to me is different from stealing and drinking when nobody’s around!”

So we sat side by side at the wall, grabbing the dark red cans that were so cold and sticky, pulled the ring, and an unspeakable sweetness stabbed at our brains.

Some said it tasted like tonic water, chemically synthesized lychee, or melted almond tofu, but I felt none of those hit the mark. If I really had to describe, it’s as complicated as the life of that petite NEET detective, rich, mysterious, and unforgettable, yet indescribable.

“Doesn’t taste good though.” Ayaka said with a chuckle. “I should have mixed in water and divided it into two.”

Ayaka probably didn’t mean anything beyond that, since she’s not someone who thinks that much. However, I could interpret her unintentional words another way. If I can’t finish by myself, I’ll just share with someone else. That’s what Ayaka often told me..

“How does Alice live on a diet basically consisting of this?”

“The doctor found her strange too, and treats her as a lab subject, testing this everyday. Thinking about it, she’s really a strange specimen in the biological world.”

“I see...so you met Alice’s doctor?”

“Well, erm, I’ve been to the hospital.”

“Is Alice feeling unwell?”

“Not really —”

Ayaka’s really a nice person. She’s able to get me to talk what I think, like fingertips prying out split ends.

But this kindness is really a drug.

The drug quickly passed through my body, and I ended up weakly saying what I shouldn’t have.

“Alice’s father died. Just yesterday.”

Ayaka stared at my face, blinked several times, and muttered.

“...I see.”

There was no shock or surprise in the tone. There’s no anguish or anger, but it’s no empty emotion. It’s like I’m calling for my own dog.

Thus, what I said next would be lured out by her.

“—Heard it was murder.”

Without thinking, I got Ayaka involved in this. I told her the truth, death, and shared it with her without holding back. Sharing this poison wouldn’t reduce the chances of my death by half, just relieving myself a lot more instead. That’s all, and nothing else.

“And then, the suspected murderer is Alice.”

After saying that, I found myself to be really stupid for saying that. If I kept talking, I would end up as a lackey thrown out after a terrible night, shiveled in a towel, trying to run away by sleeping, and just waking up moments ago with my mind still in a daze.

After spacing out for quite a long while, Ayaka asked, somehow hesitantly,

“...Do I call everyone here? Hiro, Tetsu-senpai?”

I weakly nodded. In the end, that’s all I could do. Alice’s issue isn’t just my own issue.

Ayaka gave a call, and within a minute, the trio arrived at the office.

“Actually, we’ve been waiting downstairs for a long time. We just sent Ayaka up first to see what’s going on.”

Hiro said it as if I deserved it for falling into their trap.

“Heard that you returned home late last night. We came by earlier to have a look at you.”

“Oh, I see ...”

So they knew that I would try to come to the agency alone. It’s really embarrassing to be figured out.

...Eh, huh?

“How did you know I returned home late last night?”

Keiichi drove his car to my house last night. Hiro probably didn’t know what time I returned home, right?

“Well. I gave your sister a call, Narumi-kun. I was worried.”

“My sister? Wh-when did you know about my sister’s phone number, Hiro?”

“When? Ahh yes, when I went to get you at your house on Halloween’s. Just so happened to get it.”

...Don't put it that way. And seriously, you're way too quick there. Was there an opening back then?

"As to be expected of you, Hiro. Getting phone numbers from women is as easy as breathing to you!"

"Not at all. I don't know Min-san's phone number."

"You know 'Hanamaru' number, right?" Tetsu-senpai asked, sounding really sleepy.

"I can't use the shop phone when we go out for a date."

"Can't you just date in 'Hanamaru'?"

"So that, I'll do. I've been greeting Min-san everyday with 'I love you', and got beaten real good by her."

"As to be expected of you, Hiro. Proposing to women is as easy as breathing to you!"

"Ugh, you three!!"

Ayaka threw a tantrum.

"This isn't the time for your stupid skit. You're here to hear what Fujishima-kun has to say, right? Alice isn't here now, get it?"

Who could have imagined that there would be one day when Ayaka would command the NEET detective gang? Tetsu-senpai, Major and Hiro immediately knelt before the bed in a prostration, and that made it more difficult for me to talk.

"Alright, Fujishima-kun! Tell everything about the murder of Alice's father!"

I gave a stunned look, and so did the other three of the detective gang.

“Why are you taken aback too, Fujishima-kun? Didn’t you just mention it?”

“N-no, that’s right..”

I never thought such demanding words would come from Ayaka’s mouth.

But thinking hard about it, there’s nothing to be surprised by this. She saw a lot of deaths in various forms, and in a certain sense, understood more about various deaths than I did. Is this determination, or obliviousness? Maybe it’s a mix of the two called something else entirely? I don’t know.

I held my breath, and recapped the long day yesterday. Just a nigh passed, but no matter which scene I tried to recall, it all felt fuzzy. Did these events really happen? Did that hospital and those infuriating Shionjis really exist?

I coughed a few times to interrupt my delusions.

Face reality already, Alice is no longer here.

Everything I heard and saw at the hospital, the quarrels started by the Shionjis’ inheritance, the death of Alice’s father, and Shionji Keiichi’s words. Each and every one of them caused the air in the room to freeze.

“...So what about Alice? Why didn’t she come back too?”

Tetsu-senpai asked with a hushed voice, and I shook my head,

“All I heard was that she was taken back for questioning, and I didn’t hear where she was taken to. Maybe she’s still in the hospital, or at the Shionjis.”

“Questioning, or you mean, interrogation?” Senpai said while folding his arms. “Why did they think the culprit was Alice?”

Hiro showed a gloomy expression as he asked.

“Because when her father’s artificial ventilation was removed, the alarm rang, and Mari-san was at my room. Shionji Keiichi then asked Mari-san, who said that she was with Alice, which contradicted the nurse’s claims that she was seen on the corridor. So she’s lying.”

“All that to create an alibi for Alice?”

Major narrowed his eyes, sounding bitter. I nodded and continued,

“Shionji Keiichi did think that was the case too. That Alice was really in the room back then.”

“But does that really mean that Alice did it? There were a whole bunch of Shionjis there overnight. Does that mean they all have alibis?”Tetsu-senpai asked.

“So I said, but the patient electronic lock has a log. Soon before the artificial ventilation was removed, Mari-san’s card was used on Shionji Mitsuki room. Since Mari-san was at my room, the only one who could have done that was Alice.”

Major heard it, and scowled,

“That’s just what they say, right? It’s not like the police did their investigations too. Besides, isn’t that hospital this prestigious because of the Shionjis?”

“You can say that ...”

“Also, does Alice have a motive to kill her own father?” Major asked again. “Shionji Keiichi said, Alice has a motive.”

“...Is he not saying that Alice killed her father because she doesn’t want the inheritance?”

Hiro lowered his voice.

“He did say so, actually.” I lowered my arms weakly.

“This is a mess, Saying it doesn’t exactly mean doing it.” Hiro lamented, “How can she possibly have killed for this reason? If a motive’s needed, aren’t there loads with motives? Alice’s father dies before he gets the inheritance, so the next in line is the younger brother of the Head, right? That makes them more suspicious.”

That too was what I thought.

“Sorry, I’m a little lost here...we got so many names here called Shionjis...” Ayaka tearily noted. It’s no wonder, since even I who had met them was all confused. It’s impossible to remember them all.

So I drew what I knew of the Shionjis on the notebook Major handed over to me.

“...It’s no wonder that Gorou-sensei so wanted to leave that house. It’s seems really troublesome.”

Hiro spat his tongue once he saw the family tree. There was a ‘dead’ written beneath Gorou-sensei’s name, but it’s just that he faked his death and ran to Australia. He should be alive, but for this succession crisis, we’ll have to assume he’s not around.

“The wife of Head Mitsutoshi. Half of the inheritance goes to her, right?” Hiro asked as she looked to me.

“She passed away many years ago, and they have no children.”

And that’s why the succession crisis got a lot messier. . “And also, what about the husband of this Terumi? Didn’t the Head want Terumi to inherit? If she’s still alive, that means it’ll be his things, right?” Tetsu-senpai asked.

“Ahh...nobody mentioned this, and we don't know if he's still around ...”

“Doesn't matter.” Hiro said, “Spouses cannot be heirs. In this situation, the only heir to Terumi is Mitsuki. Following that, third parties like the siblings will only be limited to children. The grandchildren, Mari-san or Alice can't take over the inheritance. If it was the heir who passed away after receiving it, that'll be a different case. This is the opposite though. Unless the will has clearly stated to whom it goes to, this old man called Mikitsugu will take everything.”

“Hiro, how are you so familiar with this inheritance thing ...”

Tetsu-senpai noted with disbelief.

“This is what I learn from chatting with the madams, and I do need to hear them grumble about this from time to time. Like the father of their husbands about to die, or the inheritance tax. I did my own research and memorized it all down.”

Enough with the bare facts. Still, thanks for the clarification.

“Eh, so...” Ayaka didn't sound too confident as she said, “Alice's father died before the Head, so Alice won't get to claim the inheritance. Is this true?”

“Yes she doesn't.” Hiro nodded, “But she doesn't need to. She just needed to give up her rights. How could she kill her father just because she got involved in an inheritance dispute with her relatives? What is that man thinking?”

“Also, if they didn't want to escalate this to the police, they could have settled this themselves. It doesn't matter who the culprit it.

“The Shionjis might think this way.” Hiro said, “But how can the relatives of his wife accept this?”

“Oh, yeah ...”

“Objectively speaking, isn’t the most suspicious on this old man called Mikitsugu, and his grandchildren?” Major sounded furious as he continued, “Or maybe that Keiichi’ has a bigger motive. Is he shifting the blame to Alice?”

“Narumi, what do you think? What kind of person is this Keiichi? Vicious?”

“...Eh? Ah, what?”

The sudden question hit me, and I jolted, squealing in surprise.

“Vice Admiral Fujishima, are you awake yet? Good thing I came prepared and invented a machine that fires sixty cans of energy drinks in a second.” “Thanks, but no thanks.” I hurriedly stopped Major from taking out something weird from his bag again.

“Hey, you’re the only one who met the Shionjis. Buck up..”

Tetsu-senpai’s words got me cringing.

“You’re right...”

“Fujishima-kun, is there anything troubling you?”

“Not really.”

I scanned everyone, saying,

“It just feels surreal.”

Once I said it, I regretted it. If I, having stayed at the hospital had said such words, surely it would be all the more surreal to the others.

But I never got to see a corpse, and never spoke to Alice after

that. It feels like I'm reading a story. Right, after that conversation I had with her last night, I didn't talk to her again, or even meet her. How's Alice doing? That inheritance and bloodline issue has nothing to do with me. They can be fed to the dogs or all I care. I just want to meet Alice. What's she thinking with her annoying family around her? Did they do anything to her? Is she being abused in any way, or forced to take the blame for no reason? These unhealthy thoughts shackled my limbs, and stopped me from moving. Without Alice, I really couldn't think of what I should do.

"You're useless when Alice isn't around Fujishima-kun."

With Ayaka saying this, I was taken aback.

"Ah, ahh...yeah..."

I rubbed my arms that were cold due to the air conditioning, and said,

"I don't know what is going on right now, and I don't know what I should do."

I could only eke out this weak voice. Having hear myself say this, I felt my strength weaken.

"Actually, we're about the same as you." Hiro said with a frown.

"It's the first time we don't have our leader around after all..." Major too sounded gloomy.

"You can't contact Alice? What about her phone?"

"I called her lots of times, but I can't get through." I shook my head, saying, "I remember she brought a computer along, so I sent her a message, but she didn't reply."

"I'll check with the police if there's anything then." Saying

that, Tetsu-senpai went to the corridor.

“I’ll go check out that hospital.” Hiro tossed his car keys.

“I’ll come along too.” Major too followed Hiro out of the agency.

And Ayaka, who was left behind, sheepishly stated,

“It’s about time for me to open shop ...erm, Fujishima-kun. If there’s anything I can help with, please do tell me immediately.”

I nodded in a daze.

“...Thanks.”

I’ll be going! Ayaka said enthusiastically, and left the room.

I sat down by the bed. How did I end up so wasted like this? Even I felt so weird. The assistant who’s always told to do things is lost without a detective. This shouldn’t be the case. Since she’s not back, I just need to find out where she is, and why. Tetsu-senpai, Hiro and Major are all doing this so decisively, but I can’t pull myself through.

It seemed that Alice didn’t wish for me to look for her.

I could still recall the tragic look on Alice’s face when she talked about being scared of ‘knowing’ herself. Back then, Alice probably understood the truth she didn’t dare approach. Given her smarts, she should be able to predict that she’ll break up with me, but she never said anything about it.

Does she not want me to get involved with her?

✱

My gut feeling came true. That evening, when I returned home

and opened my computer, I received an email from Alice. There was no text, just a large attachment file. With my trembling hands, I clicked on the mouse to unzip it, and found it was a video file.

“Yo, Narumi.”

In the video was a smiling Alice, wearing a red and white dress different from yesterday. I guess the camera's set on a monitor, and I can tell that she's facing a table.

“Sorry for getting you involved in that troublesome matter yesterday. If you're seeing this video, that means you're home now, right? Kei nii-sama wouldn't say what he did to you. I tried calling you directly, but they wouldn't allow me to give a call. The network's connected to Kei nii-sama's, encrypted everywhere. I managed to send this video to you only after begging them for a long time.”

I brought my face to the monitor, seeking everything in the background. White walls, metal doors at then back, lights switches, that's all I could see.

“I don't know what Kei nii-sama said to you. He's basically aloof to everyone, but he asked a lot of things about you. It seems he's quite impressed by you. You're really likeable.”

Alice paused for a little more, looking at her own opened hands, seemingly looking for a mark that had vanished.

She lifted her head, and with a feeble smile, she said,

“My father died yesterday...I killed him.”

Once I heard that, I gasped, my hands grabbing onto the monitor, my thumbs twisting the monitor, the black shadows dissipat-

ing.

“You should know why I did that, don’t you?”

I shook my head. Alice wasn’t really looking at me, but I kept shaking my head. She killed him? For what reason? Why did she kill her father? I didn’t want to know about this. That’s not important, I just wanted to know where she was, and why didn’t she return? That’s all.

“I don’t know if you can understand my explanation. Thinking about it, ever since I met you, half my work time has been spent on explaining things to this dull-witted assistant of mine. I shall take this as the last time, and explain everything accordingly to you.”

Final? Alice, what are you saying? What do you mean, the end? **“I wanted to release my father, and also myself. I had no choice, and it’s so simple, nobody will be hurt. Of course, I’m starting to pay the price for my actions.”**

Nobody will be hurt? Who are you trying to bluff? Haven’t you lost your freedom? Aren’t you locked in your room every day, just like before?

“You can do whatever you want with the agency. Kei nii-sama will be sending people over to move the stuff out, so it doesn’t matter whether you let it be or not, just clear out all the empty cans, the trash, or anything that will smell. You can finish up the Dr. Pepper in the fridge, think of it as a severance package, or maybe Ayaka and the others have already drank from it?”

What do you mean, severance package? Why are we talking about dealing with the agency?

Several times, I wanted to pause the footage. I didn’t want to

see this, and I didn't want to hear these words. However, my fingers wouldn't obey, and I couldn't open my eyes.

“You probably won't believe me, and you may think this footage is scripted and recorded by Kei nii-sama.”

My saliva finally entered my stomach after much difficulty/ Right, you're the scapegoat offered by the Shionjis, right?

“But I already made up my mind before I went to that hospital, to take away the thing I forgot to take back eight years ago. This is completely out of my own volition, and the only way out I could think of. The proof is in the ribbon on Lilicu's neck.”

Taken aback, I looked towards the foot of the table. The teddy bear Alice left me had been there ever since I brought it back from the hospital.

“Actually, I too wanted to end up like ‘her’, and end my own life as it was. Later on, I don’t think there’s a need, for I won’t see you again. You’re dead to me. Separation and death is a little similar after all.”

Who is the “she” referred to here? Kill yourself? What are you getting at?

“The matter isn’t complicated at all. It’s all about redemption. I’ve went beyond the point of being the speaker of the dead. I have used an actual blade to remove this life of mine. I can no longer be a detective. —”

I can no longer be a detective.

So I, as a detective’s assistant, is...

“That’s how it is, Narumi. Convey my words to everyone. Don’t ever look for me again.”

Saying that, Alice reached her hand over. At that moment, I thought she was going to hold mine, so I reached out. However, that was impossible, for it was a recorded video. She was pressing a button, and the video ended.

Following that, my mind was completely blank.

It took me a long time before I could muster all my strength to pick up Lilicu, as I inserted my fingers under the red ribbon, and fished out a hard piece of folded paper.

I opened it, and saw the words ‘translator afterword’. It appeared to be a page torn from the book, and the more I read it, the more stifled I felt.. This was written in the afterword—the author James Tiptree Jr., real name Alice Sheldon, shot her Alzheimer-afflicted husband before shooting herself...

It was the afterword in Tiptree’s ‘The Only Neat Thing to Do’.

Alice’s final message.

It’s unlikely this book would be available in the hospital. She probably tore off this page before leaving the detective agency, and hid it under the ribbon.

I lifted my head towards the monitor.

My fingers started to move on its own as I clicked to ‘replay’. Once again, Alice appeared on the monitor.

“Yo, Narumi——”

No matter how many times I repeated it, nothing changed, and the determined, business-like cold voice continued——

—But I already made up my mind.

— to take away the thing I forgot to take back eight years ago.

—This is completely out of my own volition.

You're lying.

You're lying, right?

Tell me you're lying, Alice! There's still a lot of different ideas, right? You're not the kind of person to do something this stupid. I kept yelling silently at Alice on the monitor, and again, she repeated the cold, cruel answer.

—I had no choice.

— it's so simple, nobody will be hurt.

It's just removing the artificial ventilation, just ensuring that a living corpse could obtain peace. The sight of Alice reaching for her father breathing tube in the dim room appeared vividly within my eyes.

— and end my own life as it was.

— It's all about redemption.

—I can no longer be a detective.

Why?

Why?

I crumpled the book page.

I really really didn't know what do. Till this point, even when the situation was chaotic, there was always Alice to guide me with her intellect and logic. She's no longer around, and I can't infer if there was anything more to this matter, who's the foe, and what I should reveal.

With my last ounce of strength, I activated the software, and sent Alice's message to Major. Of course, Major will then pass the message on to Hiro and Tetsu-senpai, and they'll figure out what to do next.

Anyway, I'm tired.

So I crawled over the floor, scaled the bed, and slept like a sandbag.

✱

Major replied first thing in the morning.

"Come over to 'Hanamaru', I called the Hirasaka-gumi over too."

With my sleepy eyes, I scanned those words. Hirasaka-gumi? The Hirasaka-gumi wants to help too? They're acting a lot faster than I expected, and escalated things really quickly. I should have left it to the three of them. With my sleepy eyes, I scanned those words. Hirasaka-gumi? The Hirasaka-gumi wants to help too? They're acting a lot faster than I expected, and escalated things really quickly. I should have left it to the three of them. They've been part of the detective gang for much longer than me, and should be able to handle Alice's absence.

Handle? How and what? Anyway, nobody seems to be disappointed, nobody's asking for help, and there's no real mystery to this though.

I couldn't figure it out. Just thinking left my temples with a stinging pain. I dragged my dejected body into the bathroom, and slouched over as I let the hot water fall from the showerhead and onto my body. The feeling of drowsiness and burnout just couldn't be washed away, and all I could feel was an important memory trickling away with the hot water, unable to stand upright.

I left home before 11am, and business started when I arrived at 'Ramen Hanamaru'. 20 hunks or so in black T-shirts were at the entrance, seated on cardboard and the ground, chortling as they held paper cups. They are the Hirasaka-gumi guys, and it seemed everyone's present. "I'm next! Time to train my manliness! One hand, five fingers down, push-ups while finishing a large glass of beer!"

"Hey, that's not enough. One more!"

"I'm up!"

"Another three layers!"

"That's too heavy!"

"Drink up!"

"Finish up and you won't feel so heavy!"

"He's down." "Yeah he's down."

"Downed by beer and weight, puhahahaha!"

It's an alley with no vehicles passing through, but it's pretty unsightly for these guys to be wasted on the asphalt. Stop causing trouble for the neighbors.

"Shut up and drink up! I'll send you guys to the police if you go overboard!"

Min-san lashed out as she tossed the noodles in the kitchen.

Seated on the beer crates by the door were Tetsu-senpai, Major, Hiro, and Yondaime. He was dressed in a fitting military fur jacket, having a few words with Tetsu-senpai. A few familiar uncles were inside the shop, their faces flushed.



“Ah, aniki!” “Good work, aniki!”

Those black shirts found me before I got off my bicycle. I could smell the stench of beer so far away, and I really had the urge to cycle away, but the gorilla immediately surrounded me excitedly.

“Aniki, three prayers for arriving late!”

Which shrine am I supposed to pray at three times? Isn't it three shots for coming late? Even though I can't really drink.

“Should be three barrels!” “As we expect of your guts, aniki!” I'll die. Please don't.

“Everyone agrees, banzai!” “Great that the legislation can pass through!” What's with your political sense rising right now?

“Let's learn and perform manzais like Tsuneo Watanabe!” “Who's going to do the retorts?” “Aniki of course!” “As to be expected of you, aniki. You aren't scared of the Giants!” “If Tsuneo's playing dumb, the readers are going to protest another way. Hey!”

No no no, I'm not in the mood to play manzai with you guys.

“Eh, erm, you guys...why are you having a beer party now? Aren't we here to talk about something?”

“Eh, something?” Pole blinked in surprise.

“We're here to watch the flowers and drink some beer!” Rocky raised his cup to toast.

...Watch the flowers?

I turned around, and immediately understood. Looking out through the alley, I could see the cherry blossoms lined up in the park. The partially bloomed flowers were pretty and red under

the sun.

It's this season already. Loads of things happened these past days. I am not in the mood to note the seasons. Only after they mentioned it did I recall that it was April starting yesterday.

"We were watching the flowers in the park last time." Pole said, looking drunk, "But you see, didn't they rebuild the place as a sports park last year? We can't go there to drink anymore, so that's why we're hanging out at 'Hanamaru' this year."

"We ain't exactly watching the flowers though." "Just eating and drink away!" "Master~ this cherry blossom ice cream is nice! Can I have another bowl!?"

"One person gets one bowl only! It's limited for this season!"

Min-san yelled from the kitchen.

I dragged the bicycle to the back door, and sat next to Yondaime hesitantly.

"Erm...what's the situation now?"

"Watching the flowers." Yondaime glanced aside at the gang members, scoffing.

"Eh, I know that. What I'm saying is —"

"Major showed me the video, and I heard what happened. Those idiots of mine don't know yet."

"Well...I see. So, I guess this isn't really the time, right?"

"Whether Alice is around or not, the flower viewing still happens." Tetsu-senpai's slurry voice interrupted. There was an empty bottle of 720cc Japanese wine.

"Yes, how can we not drink at this moment?"

Hiro too was drinking with much enthusiasm. Seeing the color of the liquid, I'm guessing it's most likely whisky. He's another one whose face won't be flushed even when drinking, but his eyes looking a little dazed. He seemed rather drunk.

"You~and I in the same~batch~the sakuras~"

And Major started singing an army song while drunk. What's with these guys?

"Erm...aren't we hear to discuss about Alice?"

"Discuss what?" Yondaime scoffed, "Didn't she tell us to leave her be?"

"Y-yea, but..."

"To be honest, I don't know what to do either."

Hiro's words left me dumbfounded.

"Look, if Alice was abducted, I'm going in to save her even if I have to get the Hirasaka-gumi guys to barge in. But after seeing that video, I ..."

"Aren't you guys going to save her?"

"Please, Narumi..."Tetsu-senpai looked at me in the eyes and said, "If it was Alice who killed him, and if we're to get her out from her house, the issue will get worse. Do you understand? They're hiding her because they don't want to involve the police. If we make a careless move, we might alert the police, and what happens in the hospital will be revealed."

Senpai's words took a long time before they finally sank into my mind.

Alice's not in a fix. She's alright.

Those that aren't in trouble can't be helped.

No, it's likely that if I save her and be reunited with her, she might really kill herself. For her, not meeting me again is a replacement to death. This thought left a shiver in me, It's pointless to convince myself countless times that she couldn't possibly do such a foolish thing, since she already did.

"We'll meet again at Yasukuni! Meet again at Yasukuni!"

A completely drunk Major was shouting some ominous stuff at an empty place. The drunk uncles and guys in black T-shirt too created a ruckus.

"...But even so, there's no need to be watching flowers at this time, right?"

I asked, sounding unconfident.

"Now's the time to watch the flowers." Hiro smiled, "When we're at a loss on what to do, we need to smile and do happy things. It's pointless to keep a glum face."

I lowered my eyes and shook my head. I couldn't be so care-free, and I wasn't in the mood to receive the cup before me.

I returned to my bicycle parked at the back door, picked up the Lilicu in the basket, went up the staircase, and thought of sleeping in the office.

"Hey, gardening kid ..."

I arrived at the turnaround, and turned my head around once I heard a voice from downstairs. I found Yondaime climbing the stairs, so I stopped, looking tense as I said,

"Right...sorry."

"Why are you apologizing?"Yondaime frowned.

“I-it’s nothing. I thought I made you angry.”

“You idiot.”

Yondaime said, point at the teddy bear under my armpit,

“It’s falling off.”

“Eh?”

“The nose is falling off. Hand it over.”

Yondaime snatched the doll, stormed up the third level, and entered the detective agency. I hastily gave chase.

He sat on the corridor, and took out a black plastic box from his coat pocket. There was a needle, a pair of scissors, and a spool of thread. It’s a sewing box. So he brings that along with him every time?

I knelt next to Yondaime, watching him skillfully repair the fallen bear nose.

Once he was done, Yondaime straightened his collar, and stared at the amber eyes of the teddy bear. I had thought he would talk about the ‘evidence’ Alice mentioned in the video, but he merely put the bear on my knees.

“...She owed me a lot.”

Yondaime sighed, and muttered,

“And I owe her as much.”

The score’s settled. It seemed he intended to say that he hasn’t repaid the favour, so it didn’t matter that Alice wasn’t around, right? I cupped the doll onto my tummy, my chin on the knees.

“You sent the video to Major, hoping for others to think up

ideas for you, right?”

Yondaime wasn't really chiding nor mocking me, just flatly stating the truth.

“...Yes.”

“Now that's your problem. Stop relying on others. If you are personally asking to save her, your sincerity might get everyone to help you out, as long as the situation allows for it. This goes for me, Tetsu and the others, but you're the one who has to make the decision.”

I stared blankly at Yondaime's sidelong face, blinking a few times. On that face was the cold, hard ruggedness that always nudged me from behind.

“Mine...? No, that's...Alice's problem. So that's everyone's problem.”

Yondaime stood up.

“That has nothing to do with Alice, or us. It's your problem.”

Without looking at me again, he left the office, leaving me alone in the dry air with the cold air breathing, and Lilicu staring at me worriedly.

Why does it have nothing to do with anyone else? Isn't that too harsh on Alice? No, he's always been like this.

Relying on others.

I guess it's true. Without Alice around, I was lost, scared of making my own decisions, just wanting to shirk responsibility.

I staggered to my feet, removed my shoes, returned Lilicu to her companions, and removed the pajamas hanging in the bathroom to fold. In this room that contained Alice's remains, all I

could feel was a sweet, gentle pain in my teeth no matter what I saw or touched.

I carelessly recalled the words Alice said, and compared the patterns and colors on the pajamas. I see, so the bear patterns and blue fabric do differ slightly, and they all have what looks like a chrysanthemum logo. She's right. They're all of the same brand, with such minor difference. No wonder I didn't realize it...so I tried to excuse myself, but it didn't comfort me in any way. How did I not realize it? I've been by Alice's side for a year and a half, serving as her assistant, yet I knew nothing about her.

This time, she wouldn't tell me anything beforehand. I tried taking the initiative to talk to her, but she wouldn't utter a single word.

What have I been doing over the last year and a half?

I've been saved by Alice countless times, and learned lots of things. With her encouragement, I got my battered body moving, but I couldn't do anything to repay her, always asking dumb questions, doing things without thinking, and making her worry. Whenever I ferried her on the bicycle, she would wail away. Whenever I gave her a can of Dr. Pepper without gas, I would be scolded by her. These really weren't things worth being proud of. What detective's assistant am I being? This really is a bad joke.

—Leave me alone.

That was the final order the detective left...for her foolish assistant.

Tears were about to fall. Yeah, Alice...someone as stupid as I am can easily execute this.

I left the detective agency, and the Hirasaka-gumi gang members continued to make a ruckus downstairs. Leaving aside whether Alice was around, the flowers continued to bloom. I felt a

sudden moment of rage, reviling the fact that Spring had arrived.

✱

I returned home, and snuck into my head. I thought I couldn't sleep as I slept at an irregular time, so I was trying to space out, lying on the bed. The sky was dark when I woke up. I looked at my cellphone by the bed, and found that it was 7pm. My sister sent me a message, telling me to settle my own dinner.

There was some noise downstairs, and it seemed I woke up due to it. Since my sister isn't returning home that early, it probably means dad's back. I lowered my head dejectedly on the bed. Recently, he had been returning home more frequently, just twice or thrice every month instead of the usual once every two months.

I felt melancholic being alone with my dad in the house. I put on the blanket, wanting to sleep. However, as I had just woken up, I really couldn't sleep.

So I gave up, and got off the bed to face the situation.

My body was soaked in sweat, so I removed my shirt. There was a grimy sense of dirt and grease clinging to my skin, so I opened the drawer, grabbed a shirt, and out it was a T-shirt Marisan gave me.

Right, I wonder what happened to her? She tried to speak up for her sister once she learned the latter had killed their father. Is she accompanying Alice? No way. Alice hates her—so I thought, before I noticed something.

There was a chrysanthemum shaped logo on the label at the back collar of the T-shirt. The brand was different, yet it was the same design as Alice's pajamas.

I hurried to the table, and opened my laptop. Just entering my login and password left me frustrated. I searched for the name ‘Shionji Mari’, and found her official website under the first result. Opening it, I found an entire photo of Mari-san dressed in a white dress on the front page, and the photos by the popup menu showed the names of her three brands, female, male and children clothing. All of them had that chrysanthemum logo.

How was it that I only realized at this point?

Feeling dumbfounded, my eyes lost all focus as they wavered across the monitor.

Alice’s pajamas were all Mari-san’s brand, and I took her words literally, not seeing beyond the surface. I had assumed Alice really hated her older sister. It was stupid. I really didn’t understand anything at all.

They really missed each other that much.

I’ve been so close to Alice for so long, yet I never read her thoughts. I had no right to be her assistant.

What else did I miss?

The various things that happened that night reawakened clearly in my mind, one by one.

I suddenly got to my feet, so agitated that I didn’t realize the chair had fallen behind me. Various colors and words swirled in a vortex, crumbling, scattering into fragments, and fusing together again,

A short fiery breath was eked out between my lips.

My heart calmed down, beating firmly and vigorously.

I understood.

I understood what happened that night. It was so easy to understand. It's not just one hint, all of them were revealed before me, just that I didn't know how to open my eyes.

I put on my T-shirt, grabbed my cellphone, and exhaled to calm myself down.

However, there was one point I did not get. Why did 'she' do it? That could be left for later however; I had to take action. I couldn't remain where I was, I couldn't back down. I had to advance in a direction.

Which?

I left my room, and went downstairs to the first floor, seeing a silhouette on my corridor. It's my dad, his back facing the lights in the living room. He probably came out from the toilet, since I could hear some soft water sounds.

Our eyes crossed. He passed me by, holding the door handle to the living room. I too endured the awkwardness, but after one step, I stopped, my toes creaking on the floor.

The few words nailed to my chest sizzled again, throbbing my heart.

It's my own issue. I just refused to face it directly.

So I turned around, and said to the frail figure behind that closing door,

“—Dad.”

My dad had his hand on the door that was going to close. He didn't turn his face around, and I couldn't see his expression. When did he have so much more white hair? So I thought as I saw the back of his head. No matter how he tried to run away from reality and hasten the time in his heart, he couldn't lie to his body.

“Sis sent me a message saying that she’s doing overtime...I’m going out now. She said we’ll have to settle dinner for ourselves.”

Dad didn’t reply, and remained still at the door that was centimeters ajar; I wondered if he would dissolve into sand at that moment, gone with the wind. Finally, I gave up hope, and turned to sit at the corridor, wearing my shoes.

“—Narumi...”

Finally, a voice rang.

It took me a long, laughable amount of time to understand that it was my dad’s voice. What I saw as I turned around was the aged sidelong face of my dad through the gap at the door, covered with wrinkles left behind by the many fleeting years.

“What about your dinner?”

I chewed upon the somewhat intangible answer in my mouth.

“I’ll go out to eat. There’s a ramen shop I frequent.”

In the end, that’s all I could say.

“...I see.”

Dad’s flat reply was cut off coldly as the door shut.

Once I exited the house, the faint night breeze grazed my hair. The darkness didn’t seem cold to me. The branches of the tree swayed, and between them, the lights of the buildings flickered. I could hear cats fighting somewhere, and crickets chirping, impatient for summer. The breath of life lingered in the atmosphere. It was the smell of Spring filled with birth and rotting.

Once I got on the way, I took out the phone from my pocket, hesitated on who to call, before choosing to call Yondaime.

“...What is it?”

Soon after, I got his cold reply, with a bunch of loud people in the background.

“...E-erm, are you guys still drinking?”

“At the fourth shop. We’re at a bar in Sakuragaoka.”

I could hear incoherent, brash singing. I guess the Hirasakagumi are also gathered there.

“I...want to ask you for help.”

“If you have anything to say, hurry up.”

I took a deep breath, intending to rally myself, only to hear some glass and large objects tumbling over, causing me to move the phone away from my ear.

“Tetsu, what are you going?” And senpai’s drunk voice interrupted Yondaime. *“Hey Narumi? Why are you calling Yondaime? You should be calling me first!”*

Major’s voice rang as well. *“All of you are soldiers, none of your logic applies to me!”* Hiro too spoke with questionable sobriety, *“I’m your senior here. Why didn’t you discuss it with me first?”* Well I called Yondaime because I knew you guys would be dead drunk.

“Ignore those idiots, talk.”

Yondaime seemed to have finally gotten his phone back as he prompted me. Having lost have my motivation to the drunks, I took a deep breath, and started over again.

“...I want to get Alice back from her family. I need your help.

“What about payment?”

As expected, Yondaime would start talking about the money issue. This business-like attitude really had me grateful, and I didn't have to look back to how empty I was 10 minutes ago.

“Alice says that she'll pay once she's back.”

“Didn't she say to leave her already? Doesn't that mean that she doesn't need saving? We might be unable to settle payment then.”

“I'll get her to pay. I don't care what she thinks right now, but once we get her back, I'll get her to pay as thanks”

Right, it's not Alice's issue, not Yondaime's, Tetsu-senpai's, Hiro's or Major's, but what I want.

I hope that Alice can return.

No way do I accept that I can't see her again, leave me alone. She can say that all she want. If she really hopes not to get involved with me, she could have vanished without saying anything. Why leave a message for me? Such an idiot. No matter how awkward I might look, I'm going to grab you and pull you back. I managed to lie and outtalk many, but I can't lie to my own heart.

I don't want to lose Alice.

*“You're pretty confident. I'm here to talk to you anyway, and what Alice thinks is none of my business.”*Yondaime said emotionlessly,

“What do you think will happen if you take her back? What if her actions are revealed—”

“It wasn't Alice who killed him.”

A long silence beckoned. So even Yondaime will hesitate on

how he should talk.

“—I see, good.”

He said nothing more. I heaved a sigh of relief, grateful that he’s really my sworn brother.

“Meet me at my office, we’ll be right there.”

The call ended. I slipped the phone into my pocket, thinking that I should retrieve my bicycle that’s at ‘Ramen Hanamaru’. While leaving the agency, I was scared of seeing everyone, and feeling unbearable, so I left my bicycle there, and went back. If I could decide back then to ask everyone to retrieve Alice, I wouldn’t have to make a long detour.

No, making detours is how I always lived. Haven’t I always been like this in the past? If I want to regret, I’ll do it once I enter my grave.

It’s now time to keep charging forward.

CHAPTER FIVE

There was a new ten-storey building at the intersection between Bunkyo-ku and Toshima-ku building. The main entrance was facing the main road, and it had an avant-garde design, as though the corners of a rectangle was chiseled off. The glass walls were reflecting the Spring sun, and there was a 'welcome to lease' display board at the door. My hand was covering my forehead to block the sun as I looked up at the building.

"I found where Alice is."

During the operation meeting at the Hirasaka-gumi agency, Major announced this,

"I've analyzed the video you sent me. There's the train horn at a station in the background, so it was easy for me to figure it out."

It was easy, I was impressed that he could say it without any further thought.

"So we scanned the possible areas Major marked, and found this new building to be registered under the Shionji Corporation." Tetsu-senpai continued, *"It's pretty new. Shouldn't be wrong."*

In other words, while I was wasting time being dejected, they already figured out Alice's position. It's the same every time, but I really realized how tunnel-visioned I am.

I took the initiative to ask those around me to investigate, and that's to mitigate my flaws.

I spent ten minutes circling the building once, observing the

windows on every level, the entrances to each level, the basement parking. Following that's the real troublesome part. I need to figure out if Alice's really there, which level and which room she's in, and begin planning from there.

I can't be anxious. I'm just investigating this time to create a good cover to enter the building. I approached the main door, taking photos of the railings of the various floors. Any company here is valuable information I can use. Most of the floors were empty, and there's a lot of space. Maybe it's really an appropriate place to imprison a girl here —

“You're here. That's fast.”

Those words caused me to jolt in shock.

Looking back, I found a man in white robes entering through the automatic doors. It was Shionji Keiichi.

“Ahh, yeah ...”

I never thought I would meet him at this point. I was not prepared in the slightest, and could only stumble back gaudily.

Since this person's here, does this mean Alice is really in this building? What should I do? Major and Tetsu-senpai spent effort finding this place for me, and my actions were revealed so easily. Now they're surely going to move Alice away. While this thought kept beating at the back of my head, Shionji Keiichi tilted his head, saying,

“Ah, Yuuko isn't here.”

I gulped, looking back at his face.

“You guys figured out the station and the vehicle sounds in the background of the video, and found your way here. Am I right?”

“...Eh...yeah...”

“I heard that you people have such expertise at least, so I wanted to try it out, and added some misdirecting audio into the video. It’s really not easy that you figured out the right answer within two days.”

I was dumbfounded, unable to say anything.

He mixed fake sound signals into the video? To test our capabilities ...?

“But did Yuuko not tell you to leave her?”

I clenched my fists, and could hear my joints rubbing, my nails sinking into my flesh. Calm down, now’s not the time to panic. We got baited into the palm of his hand. Reflect on this later.

“What do you want to do with Alice?”

I questioned, trying my best to hush my trembling voice.

“Now why would I tell you?”

“Don’t forget, I know what happened that night at the hospital. You sure you aren’t scared of me revealing things to the media?”

Shionji Keiichi gave a small sigh,

“Come in. We can’t talk about this at the entrance.”

I followed him through the door. There was no one at the service desk and the elevator. There was no one at the service desk or the elevator reception, and there was the stinging stench of finished construction in the building. He brought me to a little corner at the first level, isolated by a partition, with several sofas there.

“Before we begin, I have a request.”

Shionji Keiichi sat on the sofa, raising a leg as he said.

“...What request?”

“Please switch off the recorder inside your pocket.”

I couldn't hide the surprise on my face, and tapped my hand at the lump on chest pocket of my short coat .

“Don't think too much into this. I don't have the abnormally sharp senses of yours. You're here to investigate, so recording is a must.”

I bit my lips hard, and reached into my pocket, taking out the recorder pen the size of my palm.

“And your cellphone.” Shionji Keiichi added, so I placed the phone next to the recorder.

This guy's so vexingly annoying. As a detective's assistant, I've encountered various cases, and faced off against various types of people, but this Shionji Keiichi is undoubtedly the one that really annoyed me most. He knew our tricks so thoroughly, and has been toying us. Most terrifyingly, he's not really antagonistic against us.

We need to snatch Alice from this man, but our first move was scoffed aside by him, completely shattered apart.

Once he saw that the recorder and phone were switched off, Shionji Keiichi said,

“First, you have no proof of what happened that night.”

I neither agreed nor disagreed, so I listened to him quietly.

“To elaborate, we have the means to shush things.”

Of course, I knew that the Shionjis' fortunes and influence could shut the police and media up.

“But that will require a hefty price. In this sense, your threat is a decent negotiating tactic. I shall give you some painless news.”

Why’s he praising me right now? Talking with this guy feels like I have a vacuum cleaner on my ears, sucking my soul out.

“You ask me what am I planning to do with Yuuko?” Shionji Keiichi raised his other leg, “Nothing. To be precise, I just want to observe her, marveled by her.”

I sighed. It’s really ridiculous. Explaining quantum mechanics to centipedes or scorpions might be more constructive than this.

“Yuuko’s a special human, and her existence is some sort of miracle. Do you understand?”

“No, I don’t understand at all.”

I played dumb, but Shionji Keiichi ignored me as he continued,

“I’ve never met such a dazzling intellect with a desire to learn. My instincts tell me that she can devour the world, so I gave her the computer. You may think that I’m her mentor, but the truth is that she’s self-taught, and I merely pulled aside the curtain to show her how vast the world is.”

I remained silent as I stared at the robotic eyes behind the glasses. What are you getting at?

“Over the past years, I’ve been discreetly watching her grow. I can tell from trying to hack into her computer. However, I do hope to remain by her side and observe how she codes or configures. That will impress me all the more.”

I could feel a strange, indescribable feeling from this man called Shionji Keiichi; the negative words ‘intimidating’, ‘outrageous’ clearly unable to describe him. I don’t feel disgusted at him, just captivated like he’s some deep sea creature.

However, now's not the time to marvel over this. I have to figure out where Alice is, and nothing else matters now. Having finally found an opening to interrupt, I said,

"So Alice is under your supervision?"

"Of course."

"Please let her go."

Shionji Keiichi tilted his head slightly, saying,

"Your request is completely different from the demand you had made. A good point about you is that you know no shame, but you do need to be aware of your own limits."

What's with this guy? He's driving me nuts. Why's he praising me and scolding me like a parent?

"Also, I am not confining Yuuko."

I glared at his eyes, trying my best not to miss out on anything he had just said.

"I'm simply hiding her. Of course, the room is locked, but that is to prevent outsiders from entering. The Head managed to remain alive, miraculously, but it's only a matter of time until he dies. When that happens, Yuuko's predicament will be very precarious. My grandfather hopes that Yuuko will remain silent forever, and I don't know what he will do."

"Your grandfather?"

I couldn't understand. His grandfather, the brother of the Head, Shionji Mikitsugu should logically be the next in line for the inheritance, right?

"What else does he want with Alice? Legally speaking, doesn't the inheritance go to him?"

Shionji Keiichi pursed his lips, and remained quiet for a really long time. He's probably wondering how much he could reveal. While I was starting to feel nervous, he finally spoke up.

"That night, when Mitsuki-san breathed his last, there was a document by his beside. My grandfather was the first there, and dealt with it immediately, but the culprit definitely saw it."

"What's that document?"

"Better not know, and you don't want to be dealt with by him after knowing, right? Yuuko knew of this unspeakable matter."

"Dealt...what do you mean? What's the situation now?"

Shionji Keiichi lowered his eyes, and muttered, as though to himself,

"You still know nothing of the Shionjis' madness, but that's for the best."

Shionjis' madness? Is there something more to the inheritance issue I don't know of?

No, it's pointless to think about this. This guy will never say anything as long as he made up his mind. The most important thing is to fish out about Alice's situation

"You're saying you're protecting Alice, so that she won't be harmed by your grandfather, but that's no different from confining her, right?"

"I gave Yuuko communication channels and an open environment, exactly the same as when she's at the detective agency. If she's willing, she can break through the traps I set up to contact you, reveal her location, and even unlock herself to get out."

I pursed my lips.

For she was unwilling to return, and did not, instead staying in confinement on her own will.

Aren't your hacking skills better than Alice's? I'm guessing that she can't hack her way out, right? It's pointless to question this however. There's a lot of things I wanted to ask.

“...How's Mari-san now? I couldn't contact her since that day. Did you do anything to her too?”

“Mari-san's been in the hospital the entire time, watching the Head. The Head really dotes on her, just like Yuuko.”

She's been in the hospital till this point?

“So she's basically locked in the hospital?”

Shionji Keiichi continued.

“It's not wrong of you to say it. Layman terms, she's hospitalized due to overexertion. Unlike Yuuko, she's a public figure busy with work.”

In other words, is Alice willingly imprisoned because her sister's in your hands? So I thought, but I couldn't speak up.

“...With your you're hiding things, how are you going to resolve the issue of Alice's father's death?”

“This isn't something you can ask about.”

So this is taboo after all, since it involves something illegal, a potency I could threaten with. However, it's not hard to guess, since they'll likely dismiss it as medical negligence.

Let's try rattling him again. So I thought.

“It's not Alice who killed him.”

And Shionji Keiichi's face remained unmoved,

“And so?”

There was no mockery in his tone. He was really doubting, so what if Alice wasn't the killer?

“Even if it's not Yuuko who killed him, it doesn't matter to me. As long as she remains by my side, no matter whether it's a lie or a delusion, it doesn't matter to me.”

I shut up, and got up. It seemed I had nothing to say to him. Once I reached the door, Shionji Keiichi called me from behind.

“What is it?” I stopped in my tracks, and turned around.

“What does Yuuko normally eat?”

“...Huh?”

I blurted out, suddenly stupefied by this sudden, strange question.

“Based on my investigations, I gave her Dr. Pepper and ramen without noodles and meat, even having the taste mimick that of the ramen shop called 'Hanamaru', but she wouldn't take a bite.”

I blinked my eyes, and answered,

“...Eh, because she has a small appetite to begin with.”

“it's the third day. She hasn't taken a sip.”

Not even Dr. Pepper? That's weird.

“She's really weak right now. She already has weak constitution to begin with, so...”

I gasped, and closed in on Shionji Keiichi, yelling,

“What are the doctors doing!?”

“She refused the drip. Do you intend for me to bind her in a straitjacket?”

“Th-that’s not it. But, what’s this? She’s not drinking?”

“Maybe this is the ‘redemption’ she speaks of. She did mention this to you in the video she sent you, right?”

Slow, suicide?

Before I realized it, I found my hand grabbing onto the collar of Shionji Keiichi’s white robe.

“Return Alice to me right now!”

He narrowed his eyes beneath the glasses, giving a look of pity.

“Don’t make me repeat myself too many times. You are in no position to ask for anything.”

“So it doesn’t matter to you if Alice dies!?”

“Of course not.”

“...You—”

Shionji Keiichi flung aside my wrist, saying,

“If she does choose that, that will be part of Yuuko’s beautiful life.”

I was speechless, so much so that the anger dissipated and dispersed.

“And even if I do let her go, she might not change her mind. I shall watch her wilt away until her final moments.”

He's mad, his mind isn't sane. In a sense, he's the same as Alice. I shoved Shionji Keiichi back onto the sofa, and ran right for the door, the boiling brain juices seemingly oozing out of my ears.

✱

That night, we began a meeting outside the back door of 'Ramen Hanamaru', but Major was dejected right from the beginning, muttering away, and was of no help at all.

“Got duped by a fake voice...”

Eavesdropping and sound analysis are the two key specialties of Major, so much so that he considered himself a sonar operation of the JSDF. He seemed really shaken that he's been had.

However, now's not the time to bother with him. Tetsu-senpai, Hiro and I continue to scowl and glare at the wooden table, discussing how we should get Alice back.

“Anyway, we don't have much time. We can only force our way through or threaten.”

Senpai muttered, and I agreed. We can't think of falling back at this point.

“From what you say, it is that Keiichi who's imprisoning Alice himself, right?”

Hiro kept tapping his fingertips on his knees, looking jittery.

“Probably. He said that he didn't want anyone else in the family to find Alice.”

Hearing my answer, senpai folded his arms, and groaned,

“Looking at this, there are other possible locations ...but he's

the boss of his own IT company. Who knows how many buildings he has.”

“I think Shionji Keiichi’s a pervert who’s a little too obsessed with Alice? Since he wants to observe up close, he’s definitely not too far away from her.” Hiro noted.

“You’re right. Maybe he’s not being being discreet, and locking Alice in his house or office. Let’s start from the real estate companies.”

Senpai stood up, kicking a devastated Major on the leg, saying,

“How long are you going to keep sleeping? Aren’t you going to spy and eavesdrop on the target? He might return to Alice for a moment, you know.”

“Yes!”

Major’s eyes regained life, the goggles jumping up.

“Spying and eavesdropping’s my mission! See enemy, kill enemy! See enemy, kill enemy!” “Enough killing, let’s go.”

Both of them left the alley between the buildings, one following the other. Hiro waved with a smile, and once their footsteps vanished, he looked gloomy again.

“We need to **threaten** him until he's forced to compromise.”

I muttered.

The man Shionji Keiichi has a twisted sense of values, but his thought process is still logical, and he knows how to weigh pros and cons. In other words, threats are effective. If I have enough blackmail material to threaten him with, he might let Alice go.

“Luckily, or maybe not, but in any case, Alice's family has lots of unspeakable things, so maybe we can get something from dig-

ging there.”

“You’re right. I think Yondaime mentioned that he did investigate that hospital, so I asked him to continue looking there.”

“I’ll start looking for Alice’s mother then. Since she’s a hostess at Ginza, I probably can find a few leads, though it’s been more than twenty years ...”

Hiro too stood up, leaving the alley. Soon after, the exhaust pipe of the car departed, and I was the only one left behind. I saw the messages everyone sent, and was flabbergasted, wondering if we had enough time. Will this matter end even if we do save Alice? Shionji Keiichi said that even if he let her go, it doesn’t mean that Alice will change her mind—

I buried my hands into my palms.

Why’s she seeking death? Is she an idiot? What does she mean, stepping beyond the boundary of a detective? So what? There’s nothing more important than living on, right?

This thought repeated itself emptily in my mind, mocking me,

Till this point, I found many who found things more important than their own lives. There’s nothing wrong with that, and nothing fortunate or unfortunate with that. It just means that humans have evolved way too fast, and that they think too much.

Alice made up her mind, so this is my problem. I hope for Alice to live on, to show emotions next to me, and to treat me as an idiot.

“...Fujishima-kun?”

The back door opened, and Ayaka poked her head out, wearing a black apron. So it’s dinner business time?

“Want some food?”

Ayaka served me a plate of four onigiris. I shook my head.

“Sorry, I’m not too hungry.”

“I see.”

Ayaka sat on the stack of old tires opposite me, eating away, and glancing up at me from time to time. After swallowing the third, she made up her mind, and asked,

“...Is there anything I can do?”

For a moment, I didn't know how to answer.

To be honest, no. Even I couldn't really help at all here. If I had the skills or connections like the senior detective gang trio or Yondaime, I could have thought of something. However, Ayaka and I are just high school students.

However, I felt that trying to coax her or brush her off will only hurt her more.

“Not at the moment.”

I tried to watch my tone, trying to ensure that I wasn't being aloof to Ayaka, but I messed up. She's really a nice person, smiling and nodding, and I felt really guilty.

“Once Alice returns—”

Saying this, I held my breath. It's really hard to image...what will happen in the future.

“There'll be a lot of things we need you to help with. I heard that she's not eating or drinking now. Force her to eat something once she comes back...”

“...Hm, yeah. And she probably hasn't been taking care of her hair.”

“Right, guess so. I wonder if she has showered.”

I was no longer feeling as tense, for I could joke that much somehow. Ayaka probably heard the details about Alice’s predicament from Hiro, but she stood strong, and she remained strong.

Thinking about it, I started to have some appetite.

“I think I’ll have one. Can I?”

Smiling, Ayaka brought the face before me.

I kept gnawing away at the rice, thinking about Alice. Where exactly is her ‘home’? The Shionjis filled with years of bloodshed, or the hospital that was clean but dead, or this ramen shop we’re at?

✱

The next morning, I went to the Hirasaka-gumi office. Yondaime sent me a message, notifying me that he found some new intel from the hospital.

“Good work!” “Good work, aniki!”

I passed through the metal door, and a group of guys in black T-shirts bowed properly towards me. I went into the storeroom, and saw Yondaime seated in the dark room, the light of the laptop reflected on his face.

“You say you can’t send this through mail, so it’s something really big, right?” I sat on the bed, and asked.

“That’s not all.” Yondaime curled his lips, “Isn’t Shionji Keiichi Alice’s master? It won’t be difficult for him to read through our mails. You don’t want him to know what cards we have, right?”

“O-oh yeah...I guess so.”

“I gave Tetsu and the others a call.”

“Sorry about everything ...”

Wake up already, so I chided myself. How did I not notice that? Me not having the expertise nor the brains is basically dead-weight at this point.

“I went to threaten the doctors at that hospital, and found something really interesting. Alice’s father, Shionji Mitsuki, was born there too.”

“...Oh, so—what’s interesting about that?”

“It’s a big hospital now, but back then, it was just some broken down clinic. No way would the Shionjis leave their little princess to this place.”

Right, the hospital had such big facilities invested heavily in that place before Alice was born.

“It looks like the owner of the clinic was a **shady** acquaintance of Shionji Mitsutoshi during his younger days, a yakuza doctor who deals with dirty work.”

“Eh, so that means Shionji Mitsuki’s parentage isn’t something the outsiders could know of, right?”

Yondaime nodded.

“When he was Mitsuki’s mother—Shionji Terumi, didn’t seem to be born then.”

“...That’s quite an issue for a lady born to a prestigious family.”

“And also, nobody knows who Mitsuki’s father is.”

For a moment, I couldn’t grasp the main point, and blinked in

surprise. Yondaime hushed his voice, and continued,

“Listen up, what follows is just a hunch of mine. For a child whose father remains unknown, don’t you think Shionji Mitsuki was treated really well?”

“...Now that you mention it...that is true.”

The Head had deemed him the heir, took him in as a godson, and paved the road for him to take the entire inheritance. It was truly abnormal for the Shionjis, who really valued blood relations.

This got me thinking of a certain possibility. Blood relations...?

And I shivered at that notion. No way?

Yondaime seemed to have noticed my stiffened face, as he then continued calmly,

“It’s just my guess, but I believe Shionji Mitsutoshi is his father.”

“In other words...sibling incest.”

I looked back at the poised glint in Yondaime’s eyes, and froze. No way, that thought was immediately replaced by the idea that no, everything is possible. I recalled everything I had investigated, the strange atmosphere I sensed from the Shionjis at the hospital, and I was thus further convinced.

The distillation of the Shionj’s rich family bloodline.

The illegitimate child born between the siblings— Shionji Mitsuki.

The Head Mitsutoshi deemed Mitsuki as his own son, and loved him dearly, so much that he left the entire inheritance for the latter. If they were already father and son to begin with, then everything Mitsutoshi did made sense.

“But...there's no proof to that, right?”

“Using it to threaten them should be enough. Every little bit of intel we get should be enough progress. If my guess is correct, the main parties involved aren't the only ones who know this secret.”

“I guess...so.”

After a vague answer, I got my brain moving, and was thoroughly rattled by a possibility I had thought of. If Shionji Mitsuki really is the Head Mitsutoshi's own son, what will the aftereffects be?

Yondaime continued calmly,

“Once this matter is revealed, the first issue will be the inheritance. Currently, Mitsuki is Mitsutoshi's “*nephew*”, and the inheritance won't be transferred over to his daughters because of his death. If he's the ‘*son*’ however, things will be much different.”

“I see, so that means Alice and Mari-san can inherit, right?”

“It's not about whether they can take the inheritance. The inheritance the Head's brother hope to take will be zero, divided between the Head's granddaughters. Mitsutoshi is still alive, and there's a chance for him to recognize them.”

That's a nuclear-level secret for the Shionjis.

“Isn't Alice's sister taking care of Mitsutoshi? That'll be perfect. Once the old man wakes up and identifies them, the inheritance will be divided between Alice and her sister.”

“No, but Alice and Mari-san don't want to inherit, right?”

“Are you stupid? We're not going to do this for real. We're just going to use this to threaten the Shionjis, that this will happen if it's all revealed.”

Ah, I see. So that's what he means.

“But” Yondaime hushed his voice again, “If that’s the truth, the risk will be equally big. We’re talking about an astronomically high figure being involved here after all.”

I swallowed my bitter saliva. He’s saying that we should be prepared for the worst, that we will be silenced forever.

And thus, I realized this was what Shionji Keiichi was referring to. There was a document in the room when Shionji Mitsuki was murdered, Is that proof of his parental lineage with the Head Mit-sutoshi? And Alice knew of this fatal secret to Shionji Mikitsugu, who could take the entire inheritance to himself.

So that’s why he wants Alice silenced forever?

When Shionji Mitsuki was still alive, Shionji Mikitsugu said that he would rather have Alice inherit than have it fall into the hands of outsiders. However, he got the chance to inherit everything, and intends to eliminate Alice, who knew the truth.

The rotten vortex of blood and desire left me nauseous.

The madness of the Shionjis

It’s way too risky to blackmail them with this to obtain Alice,

“If there’s a need to, leave the negotiations to me.”

“Eh...n-no, I can’t have you do such a dangerous thing.”

“It’s worse if you’re to handle this. You’re way too honest.”

For a moment, I really couldn’t say anything . Is this secret even useful? The one hiding Alice isn’t Mikitsugu, but Keiichi. If he’s to weigh between the inheritance his grandfather can get against Alice, Keiichi will surely choose Alice, won’t he?

Or perhaps I should just reveal what I know without threatening him instead. Shionji Mitsuki is Head Mitsutoshi's own son. If this is revealed to everyone under the sun, it'll be pointless to silence Alice, and the reason to hide her is no more.

No, maybe there's no reason to hide her anymore, but that's not enough reason to let her go. It doesn't hurt Shionji Keiichi personally in any way.

I didn't know what to do. There's so much I didn't understand, and I couldn't determine my direction.

Thank you for helping me, I'll go back and think about it; saying that, I stood up.

"So what are we going to do!?"

"Where are we going to fight!?"

"Who are we going to shape up!?"

Yondaime and I left the storeroom, and the bunch of gorillas surrounded us, yapping away. Shocked, I stumbled back, bumping into Yondaime behind me. I glanced back, trying to gauge his reaction, "Deal with it." but he coldly retorted. Seriously, we haven't exactly decided on what we're going to do.

"Erm, what I need everyone to do —"

"We're willing to give our all for Alice nee-san!"

Pole said, glaring with ferocity,

"We're stupid. We don't understand the complicated stuff, but we're willing to do anything!"

Rocky too added on with bloodshot eyes,

"Nee-san always took care of us, but we haven't repaid her in

any way!”

“Tell us what needs to be done, we won’t disappoint you, aniki!”

“We’ll do anything for nee-san!”

I intended to coax them and run away, but my words were stuck in my throat, and I ended up stupefied in the middle of twenty or so stares. I suddenly felt some warmth deep within my abdomen, and with my trembling lips, I swallowed the overwhelming emotions back into my lungs. I finally made it tangible, and spoke up,

“...I’ll come up with a strategy soon. Until then, I’ll need everyone’s help. Please lend me your strength.”

“—Roger!”

“Roger!”

The gang members answered.

Once I left the office, I and looked up at the flowery cloudy skies, and pedalled on my bicycle. As the winds blew in my face, the heat in my body became more definted.

I called out to Alice, who was somewhere under the same sky.

There are many here waiting for you. Everyone’s worried about you. This town is your home, isn’t it?

If you have forgetton, or are trying to forget about this —

I’ll make sure that you’ll remember.

✱

Hiro's investigations didn't go well. The biggest problem we have is that we don't know what's the family name of Alice's mother is. It's too late to regret not asking Alice or Mari-san, and I couldn't call Shionji Keiichi (He might give the name easily, but he would have sniffed out our intentions), Hiro can only ask his acquaintances in Ginza, and try his luck friend. There's also a chance our messages would be hacked, so he could only call or meet them directly.

And so, he was completely worn out once he returned to 'Ramen Hanamaru' at noon.

"I didn't sleep the entire night. It's been a while since I last walked that much, but too bad I whiffed on everything."

Hiro said that wearily, and immediately finished the PET bottle.

"It was more than twenty years ago when her mother was a hostess, right? I don't know if the shop she worked at back then is still around...looking at this rate, it's unlikely we'll find it, and even if we do, we might not be able to obtain anything really valuable."

"So are you saying that it's better for us...to give up on the mother?"

Hiro weakly nodded, and I looked down, sorting my thoughts out.

We need any and every weapon that allows us to seize the initiative from Shionji Keiichi's hands. We got one thanks to Yondaime, but it's unreliable. The point about Shionji Mitsuki being borne out of incest is just a guess, there's no actual proof, and we don't know how much damage it can cause. It's over if he just dismisses it "Go ahead and reveal it." We need something more concrete. Looking at what was said during the Shionjis's family meeting at the hospital, I can tell the circumstances behind

the death of Alice's mother is very suspicious. If we keep digging there, it might cause fatal damage to the Shionjis.

But we really don't have much time. While I continue to think about this, Alice might collapse.

"It'll be easier if only there's someone of direct relation to Alice's mother ..."

Someone with direct relation to Alice's mother. The Shionjis, the posh clubs at Ginza—

"—Ah"

Hiro looked up,

"What?"

"Th-there might be one."

I fished out the cellphone from my pocket, and made a call. Right, there should be a mama at a Ginza club. Which number is that again?

"Narumi-kun, you know such people?" Hiro widened his eyes.

"Gorou-sensei's women."

"Ahh!" a tad later, Hiro realized.

Mari-san mentioned that Shionji Mitsuki met the woman who would become his mistress after Gorou-sensei brought him to a club. Someone like Gorou-sensei can't possibly not have done anything to the women in those clubs. I looked for the numbers of the 13 women who were given Gorou-sensei's parting gifts. One of them might know Alice's mother.

Of course, I had long forgotten who these names were, so I had to call them one by one. It's a gut-wrenching job.

At the sixth—

“...Yes, that’s right. Gorou-sensei did bring his nephew along —eh? Really? Yes, yes...right, right, of course!...Ehh, that’s...erm, I see. That’ll be best.”

Once I hung up, I gave Hiro a thumbs up,

“I’ll go over to Ginza.”

I ran off, and behind me, I could hear Hiro sighing away,

“So your gigolo skills have surpassed mine, Narumi-kun ...”

She’s not my lover, you know?

For the first time in my life, I entered a posh club in Ginza.

I exited the elevator, and there was a little display board made out of gas lighting, with the word ‘Sawa’ there. As it was before operation hours, only the lights in a corner of the room remained lit, and there were no flowers in the exquisite vases. I was brought to the innermost place, and sat on a white leather sofa. The dazzling chandelier and the pure white grand piano were too searing to my eyes. I really was not used to being at such places, and could not sit comfortably.

“Welcome, Fujishima-san.”

The mama Sawa-san was in her fifties, dressed in splendid cherry blossom pink which really met her well. She placed a glass cup with cold ginger ale before me, and sat 90 degrees aside from me.

“Sorry to trouble you the last time.” Sawa-san bowed politely. She was probably referring to the parting gifts. As the funeral was an act we played for Gorou-sensei, I felt really guilty about it.

“Sorry for disturbing you at your shop.”

“Please don’t mind about it. I am apologetic for showing you in when this shop is still being prepared. It does seem you wish to talk about something urgent however, and I couldn’t think of a place convenient for us to talk, so I could only humbly invite you. The other staff members aren’t around though, so rest assured.”

This service attitude from a posh club owner really left me all the guiltier.

“I suppose something really big happened, no? You hve a dangerous presence just like Gorou-san, Fujishima-san. Such men are the ones women really can[’t let go of.”

“Well...I see.”

I didn’t know how to respond, and decided to go straight to the point instead.

“Erm, you say you know Shionji Mitsuki?”

“Yes...you want to know about Aiko-san, right?”

Seto Aiko, the name of Mari-san and Alice’s mother.

“Erm, is it better for me not to know why you are asking about Aiko-san now?”

Guilt nearly overwhelmed me as I lowered my eyes, saying,

“I’m really sorry, Erm...I have some trouble with the Shionjis, and I need to settle this, so we need to know about what happened to Aiko-san in the past...but I really can’t state the specifics.”

“It’s fine.” Sawa-san smiled, “You’re Gorou-sensei’s disciple, so I trust you.”

I have a lot of words to say, like I’m not his disciple, or you can’t really trust a disciple of that guy, but I did my best to swal-

low my words.

“Sawa-san, you were colleagues with Aiko-san?”

“Yes. That was before I opened the shop, about thirty years ago. It’s really nostalgic.”

Sawa-san used to be a hostess, and worked at a club in Ginza (though it appears the club is no longer around). Seto Aiko’s slightly younger than Sawa-san, and whenever she was feeling unstable, she would speak her mind with Sawa-san.

“Aiko-san resigned soon after getting together with Shionji Mitsuki, but we were still friends, and would have a meal probably once very month. I did seem her daughter Mari-san a few times while she was younger. Now she’s a global superstar ...”

Sawa-san looked melancholic.

“If Aiko-san is still around, surely she will feel proud. She often said that her biggest wish is to have her own line of clothing.”

Did Seto Aiko discuss her own dreams with her young daughter Mari-san, who then fulfilled her mother’s dream to step onto the world stage?

I felt a sudden stinging pain in my heart. Following that, my dirty hands would have to dig into the memories of the dead, to obtain materials that could threaten the Shionjis.

“Erm, did that Aiko-san...mention about Mitsuki-san?”

“Mostly to grumble about him. Aiko-san never really said that they were on bad terms, but it does seem that every week, when Mitsuki-san visits them, he’s not there to look for her, but for their daughter Mari-san, so she really grumbled quite a lot.” Sawa-san laughed, “She actually got jealous of her own daughter.”

Jealous of her own daughter? I recalled the mesmerized look Mari-san had when she recalled about her father and her childhood, and it left me unable to swallow this.

“So later, the Shionjis discovered her relationship with Mitsuki-san?”

Sawa-san’s face sank,

“He was married. It was a matter of time.”

“I heard she was brought to the Shionjis?”

“Yes. Aiko-san was brought to negotiate at their residence, and Mari-san was taken from them, even had her family name changed to Shionji...I think the grandfather or someone else ordered it.”

“Did Mitsuki-san visit Aiko-san’s apartment again?”

“Impossible.” Sawa-san looked at me silly.” They made sure that Aiko-san would never meet Mitsuki-san again. Back then, she was really crestfallen, and I had enough. It seems his wife had said something really harsh to her.”

I guess so . The doubt I had when I was with Alice at the hospital occurred again. The mistress should have been pried apart from Shionji Mitsuki due to the Shionjis’ themselves, so why was she able to give birth to a second child, and that birth heavily financed by the Shionjis?

Alice said that she had more or less deduced the truth, but I dared not to ask her the answer. How did Mari-san talk about Alice’s parentage? Thinking back about it, it seemed she just made a few vague references to it.

“Mari-san has a sister, about ten years younger.”

Hearing me say that, Sawa-san widened her eyes with sur-

prise,

“...What did you say?”

“So I thought the relationship between Aiko-san and Mitsuki-san didn’t end there just because it was revealed. Now that you said so, it seems that wasn’t the case. Did they pretend to break up and meet secretly instead?”

“It’s...impossible.”

Sawa-san said, giving a skeptical look,

“Aiko-san often told me that they wouldn’t let her meet her daughter. Once, when Mari-san left home to look for Aiko-san, she stayed for one night, and the next day, the Shionjis caught her. It seemed some harsh words were said to her, that if Mari-san dared to run away, Aiko-san was to leave Tokyo forever.”

Saying this, Sawa-san took out a handkerchief, and covered her mouth,

“...I think it was thereafter that she did that foolish thing ...”

“...She...committed suicide, right?”

Sawa-san nodded, and said sadly. “Why did she not talk it through with me...”

Mari-san said her mother was killed by the Shionjis.

“I’m sorry for making you remember such painful memories, but there is something I have to be sure of. How many years ago did Aiko-san pass away?”

“How, many years ago was that...”

Sawa-san blinked, thought for a moment, said,

“Oh yes, I remember. Aiko-san said her daughter had just attended elementary school when she spent the night there, and talked a lot about school. How old is Mari-san now...26, 27? That should be twenty years ago.”

The gears of thought started to click in a corner of my mind.

Wait, the numbers don't add up.

Seto Aiko died before giving birth to Alice?

Did Mari-san lie? Is Alice too kept in the dark regarding her own birth?

A tinge of cold air rose up my hands, cooling me. Then to whom was Alice born to?

“Is her little sister, really Aiko-san's child?”

Sawa-san asked. I stared at the edge of the table, shaking my head.

“...I may say so...but... it doesn't seem to be the case.”

“So she's not the wife's child either?”

Is Alice borne to Shionji Mitsuki's wife, Kyouka?

In a certain sense, it's logical. A hospital that had given birth to the nephew borne out of incest couldn't possibly offer its finest facilities to a hostess mistress. If it's the wife who gave birth to her however, that would make sense.

But this will create another suspicious point. If Alice is the child of the wife, why cover it up?

I recalled what Mari-san said, that Shionji Mitsuki wasn't willing to inherit the Shionjis's business. Once he gave birth to a heir, it would be harder for the Head Mitsutoshi to take him in as an

adopted son. Did he use the child of a mistress as of his own wife instead?...No way, it's impossible. Even if Shionji Mitsuki did really have such thoughts, he would have needed the assistance of his wife Kyouka to fool the entire world, and surely she wouldn't have agreed.

Right. Someone said that day that Shionji Kyouka returned home immediately once she discovered her husband's infidelity, and never returned to the Shionjis. Since she was living away from her father, it was unlikely she would have given birth.

So Alice really isn't Seto Aiko's child? But since she resembled Mari-san so much, it doesn't seem like they have different mothers.

"Erm, Sawa-san...have you seen Aiko-san corpse?"

This question might really defy all common sense. Sawa-san expression froze, before she relaxed, shook her head, and said,

"No, that's what I heard. She didn't have a funeral."

Not even a funeral? Then—

Assuming that Seto Aiko didn't die, and was alive until she gave birth to Alice, what will that imply? Did she fake her death so that she could continue to meet Shionji Mitsuki, got pregnant, and suffered complications. Then she could only give up on hiding, and protected her daughter through the power of the Shionjis.

Results wise, it seemed to work out, but thinking into it, there was something conflicting. Trying to fake the death of someone is really difficult; I did that once, so I understood how hard it is. It's really taxing, and there's really no worth doing so unless there's a really good reason. Faking a death just to maintain an extramarital affair. Besides, Seto Aiko committed suicide. The police would have investigated the actual cause of death, and faking her own

death would be too troublesome.

I really don't understand. What happened between then?

I firmly believed that was still some secret to the death of Alice's mother, an unexpected one. I rubbed my fingers on my aching temples. Love, desire, hatred, all of these remained intertwined, and I really couldn't think of anything to unlock this mystery..

"The staff members are about to start work." Sawa-san apologized.

"Ah, I see, sorry."

I felt a daze as I stood up, and barely pulled through by supporting myself off the table.

"Thank you for your assistance today. You told me so much, but I really couldn't say anything. I'm really sorry."

"Don't say that. I'm really glad to be able to help."

The sun was setting when I left the building the club 'Sawa' was located at, The shop and street lights of the Maronie Street continued to dazzle and dazzle upon the packed crowds and vehicles. The night breeze of early April remained cold, and I pulled up the front of my jumper, moving towards the metro station.

Nobody was waiting for me when I returned to 'Ramen Hanamaru'. Dinner operating time was about to begin, so Min-san and Ayaka were busy in the kitchen. I had nothing to do, and spaced out at the tire chair, before I stood up and .

Whenever I turned the knob to the detective agency knob, would always imagine Alice grumbling and throwing empty cans at me, getting off the bed angrily and berating me for not pressing the doorbell. But in reality, what welcomed me was the emptiness of the cold air in the room. There was no one inside, just the soft

sound of the fridge running away.

I sat on the bed, waiting for the viscous, tremulous object in my mind to cool and settle down.

Was this trip really beneficial?

I found a new truth behind the Shionjis's motives. There was a missing puzzle between Alice's birth and her mother's death. The truth and the reasons for hiding them remains uncertain, and Mari-san might be one of the accomplices too. Did she too get fooled by the Shionjis the entire time? I tried to recall every word she said to me. While my memory was rather hazy, I could remember the conversation I just had with Sawa-san, and the final words I said to Alice at the hospital.

Maybe I didn't see to see the truth clearly, that I should first throw down everything I knew, and see how Shionji Keiichi would react. I would pretend to know everything, and play all my cards one by one, causing him to think I might have a fatal bomb. There's no need to know the truth.

But it's Shionji Keiichi I'm dealing with, and the number of effective cards would be more than what we have. I guess he'll see through this gimmick very quickly.

This is useless. My head's in a mess. Let's just take a nap. I went to lots of places today, and my body feels heavy.

But while I thought of Alice's life was trickling away for all the time I waste, I couldn't sleep. I was completely weary, but I dared not to close my eyes.

So I turned my body around, and laid face down.

I should observe the place that detective usually resided in a different angle, only seeing what she has seen.

Alice, why were you willing to do that? Tell me. If what Shionji

Keiichi said is true, your computer network should be able to connect, and you should be using your infinite intellect to rip apart that bastard's damn defences, hack into the internet and get into the phone. I really want to talk to you, to hear your voice, to see your face...I want to meet you again.

Suddenly, I lifted my eyes.

On the racks unbefitting of a girl's tastes, between the various devices crammed together, there was a blue item.

The spine of a book.

I got up, and checked the book I had never discovered before. At that moment, I noticed several small novels behind the rack, for I was seated at Alice's personal space in her absence.

I pulled them out, and found them to be published under the Hayakawa SF Print Label.

'Ten Thousand Light-Years from Home'

'Love is the Plan the Plan is Death'

'The only neat thing to do'...

Each of them were written by James Tiptree Jr.

Did her father give her these books? Each of them looked so old, and the head and tail had changed color, like coffee. I flipped through a few pages and found that the last page of 'The only neat thing to do' was torn. It was a page of the afterward, the last message Alice hid beneath the ribbon of the teddy bear for me. Seeing that page, I felt the pain from back then, and I laid back onto the icy bed, covering the book on my chest.

Will I understand what Alice's thinking after reading through them?

I tried to pick up another book, but I was just so unmotivated, and I couldn't muster the urge to read these stories, so I could only just flip through the afterword without purpose.

Once I was flipping through the fourth book, 'Ten Thousand Light-Years from Home', I read through the translator afterword, and found a word sizzling slightly within my head. I didn't know what it was, so I reread it again. There was a biography of author James Tiptree Jr., or Alice Sheldon, and an explanation of the various short stories. It served no purpose to me at this point, but I reread it three times.

Then, I finally understood, closed the book, and sat upright.

Everything made sense.

Each doubt became so clear to me, sparkling on the horizon, searing my eyes, and the heartache and exhilaration kept throbbing at my chest.

So, that's why this happened?

That's why she tried that only neat thing to do?

I understood. She really had no other choice, and I was the same. The entire bloody truth had to be buried deep under. Just a few hours ago, I was thinking that I was going to dig out everything that could be used to blackmail the Shionjis, but at this point, I was really ashamed of myself.

Alice, once I sat at your place, I finally understood the cold you experienced as you digested the truth to every case. For each grave you dig up, your heart must surely be bleeding for the dead, right? I always said to you that I hoped to share that pain, even if it's a miniscule percentage. I was so naïve to think that I could. I'm really an arrogant fool. How can this feeling be shared with others? One can only shiver with both knees cupped together, and grit my teeth, enduring this.

As the cold air rained down upon me, I stared at my hands, stretching my stiffened fingers forward, clenched them, and straightened them again.

What should I do?

The thoughts kept echoing within my skull. What do I do? What do I do? What do I do...?

The answer was long evident before me, and in the end, I still didn't have the makings of a detective. I could only be a con artist, piling layers of dirt and ash upon the truth, sealing and concealing it with gold power, and fabricate it as a truth everyone could see.

I'll fight you.

I hopped off the bed, left the room, and when I locked the door, I lifted my eyes, and spotted the board with the cute font on it.

NEET detective agency

It's the only NEET thing to do.

It's the only neat thing to do (It's the only NEET thing to do.)

Is that it?

Of course, because I too had this one life to live. As I descended the emergency staircase, I found four heads gathered at the back door. Each of them looked up towards me one by one, seemingly having heard my footsteps. I could see Tetsu-senpai's tanned, ferocious face, Major's immature, sly looking face covered with goggles, Hiro's weary, yet gentle smile, and Yondaime's savage, calculating scowl.

"We've sort of figured out where Alice is."

Tetsu-senpai said. I sat down at the empty seat between

Yondaime and Hiro.

“it’s at his company, the building Aster Tataricus is located at building, Major saw a doctor enter. We can’t be certain on this day alone, but the real estate company said that they sent a laid package upstairs, and one of them was clearly a king sized bed. Most likely, she’s inside.”

The four of them exchanged looks, and nodded, before looking towards me. Major continued,

“We don’t know which floor she’s at however, and we can’t really send in too many guards. If all the Hirasaka-gumi guys are to check every single floor, maybe we might find them.”

“But it’s pointless if they’re all locked.” Yondaime refuted, and I recalled the tight security lock of the chairman room of Aster Tataricus. If he did install such a security function at Alice’s place, it’ll be pointless to get any more people to look for her.

“What do we do now? if we can add more to the payment —” Yondaime hissed, “I don’t really like this, but we might have to use the worst means possible.”

“Do we interrogate Shionji Keiichi for Alice’s location?” Tetsusenpai too hissed his voice.

“Right.”

“No.” Hiro chimed in, “What do we do later? He’s rich, and had power. There’s a likelihood he can lock us up and take Alice back easily. Everything will be over then.”

“Of course the ones to go to jail are us.”

“That’s really no good, Yondaime. Your thoughts are really like that of the yakuza.”

“Of course, I know the best option is to catch their weakness

and make sure he won't do anything again. Can't we just barge into his office to find something? If we can find proof that he's imprisoning Alice, we can use that."

Tetsu-senpai shook his head,

"If it's that easy, I would have saved Alice already. Every level of that building uses the latest security system, and there's no way to go in. If Alice's around, we might be able to hack in and wreck things up ..."

"Can you find anything you can do, Hiro?"

Hiro answered Yondaime dejectedly.

"Nothing. I really am useless this time. What about you, Narumi-kun? Didn't you go to Ginza? Have you found anything to blackmail them with?"

"E-erm..."

I responded halfheartily, spat a tongue out to moisten my lips, and sensed the stares gathered upon me.

Once again, I realized this was really my case. I was the one making the request, and acting as detective. It's simple, I just want to take back the one precious to me, whom I was about to lose.

Thus, I had to make up my own mind.

"I haven't found anything, but I got an idea of how we're going to do this. There's no need to threaten, and like usual —"

But saying this really made me nervous.

"I'm going to bluff him."

The four of them showed different expressions. The breeze felt

cold and stinging, probably due to how the atmosphere had cooled, but beneath the thin layers of skin was a fire that couldn't be constrained, throbbing away.

“Tetsu-senpai——”

“Alright!”

“I guess, in the end, we need you and the gang members to break in, so please analyse the layout of the building, find out Alice's possible location, and choose the path.”

“Got it, already settled.” Senpai chuckled as he took out the blueprint, waving it. To be expected of him.

“Major.”

“What do I have to do?”

“Are you familiar with elevators? Can you control it?”

The immature eyes beneath the goggles blinked a few times,

“Elevator? Of course. I can handle any machine on this world in a jifty.”

“Understood. I'll explain the details later.Hiro——”

“I'll do anything.”

An already weary Hiro was suddenly exburent, his face flushed.

“I need you to date a woman...by tomorrow.”

“I can settle that today.”

These requests so far aren't the hard part. What I would say next really left me unable to maintain my poise.

“Yondaime...”

“What?”

He glanced aside at me, his glare upon my face.

“Lend me some money.”

Tetsu-senpai, Major and Hiro were taken aback, while Yondaime didn’t bat an eyelid.

“How much?”

“I don’t know how much I need right now, so I can’t sort out the numbers. We’ll probably need tens of millions however.”

The sum was astronomically large, and the other three were dumbfounded. I thought I would be retorted to kingdom’s come. My sworn brother however agreed easily.

“A discount for you. 30% annual. Make sure Alice pays up.”

“—No...no problems!”

That night, I pedalled my bicycle to Shinjuku, and went to a seven storey building at a cross junction next to the royal residence. The lights on each level remained lit, showing the company logo ‘ZODIAC’.

I never thought I would return here again, so I thought as I stood on the pavement, looking up at the building.

Min-san’s wedding turmoil, the crisis of ‘Ramen Hanamaru’ nearly closing down, our conflict against the Hong Kong triad; that all happened last year in November. It felt like it was a month ago when I cycled with Alice riding along, her hands grabbing onto me. I exhaled, saw the cold night breeze of Spring pass along, and felt that it was years ago.

I made a call to at the counter, and waited a few moments. A tall, lanky woman dressed in pants suit exited the lobby. The short hair and sharp eyes seemed devoid of all feminine charms walked out. It was Huang Xiao Ling, Min-san's cousin, the granddaughter to the boss of a Hong Kong triad, and the general manager of this 'ZODIAC' IT company. She's a very terrifying female.

"I never thought I would meet you here again."

Once we entered the elevator together, Xiao Ling-san said with a sigh. Same here, so I nearly retorted, but I swallowed them, and instead dispensed with the usual pleasantries.

"I'm really sorry for intruding at such a late time, especially since you're busy."

"Enough. Surely you aren't here to discuss anything good."

Xiao Ling-san brought me to her office on the sixth floor, which was neat and spacious. There were feminine decorations like vases and dolls on the racks, which relaxed me somewhat. She invited me to sit on the sofa, and served me some tea as part of the pleasantries.

"I won't say that I don't owe you a favour, so tell me what you want me to help you with?"

I found it more difficult to speak up.

"First, this."

I handed a printout and a USB memory card. Xiao Ling-san looked at it, and said,

"I want you to publish this report on the frontpage of ZODIAC. I'll specify the time."

"This is fake news, right?"

“No. Once you air it, it’ll become reality.”

Xiao Ling-sans shot a suspicious look to my hand, exhaled, and sigh again,

“Since we’re talking about ‘first’, that means there’s a ‘second’, right?”

“Yes. Also, there is another building linked directly to East Shinjuku station. There a subsidiary to ZODIAC located there, right?”

She tilted her head in confusion,

“What do you want to do?”

“I want to borrow some people.”

Xiao Ling-san shot me a sharp look. Then, she said,

“Did something happened to that little detective and her family?”

“...Eh, you know who the boss of Aster Tataricus is?”

“Goes without saying, no? We’re in the same industry, so we’ll do our investigations somewhat.”

I guess so. The companies are in the same building after all.

“Alice has some dispute against the Shionjis. Erm, the details are a little inconvenient. For your safety, it’s better not to.”

She let out a little sigh between her lips, and said,

“Always with the shady matters, and you might not return to being a normal person of society.”

“Thank you very much for the advice ...”

I was well aware of this myself.

“But this involves Alice’s life. I don’t have much time left, and there’s no one else I can rely on. We need a lot of people here, and though the Hirasaka-gumi can help with the personnel, they’re way too obvious, and it’s easy for the enemy to notice our plan. So, erm...I really need your help. I’ll pay.”

Xiao Ling-san shook her head, finally having enough of me,

“That company is not managed under me.”

“...Eh?”

“That’s Hong Lei’s company, so you should ask him. I’ll explain the situation for you.”

“Ehhhhhhhhhhhhhh?”

I exclaimed. Huang Hong Lei, Xiao Ling-san’s older brother, and the young lord of the Hong Kong triad. He’s the most dangerous and violent of them all. You want me to ask that Huang Hong Lei?

No, it’s fine. I did consider this possibility. I thought I should have looked for Huang Hong Lei directly to make things easier, but I was really scared that he would do anything scary to me, so I decided to contact Xiao Ling-san. At least, she’s not going to beat me up or stuff a knife into my mouth.

“If you need to find a few fighters, you should be looking for Hong Lei’s assistance, right?”

“Erm...yeah, that’s right...”

“You’re a weird one. You can drag a bunch of people along for the ride to share the risks with you, and plan something that’ll cause your death if you’re not careful. Now you’re scared of asking Hong Lei?” “...I suppose I really lack imagination when the

crucial moment happens.”

I scratched my head, saying.

“I guessed so.”

Xiao Ling-san picked up the phone, probably intending to call Huang Hong Lei.

“You can do the big things without a word, yet be so hesitant on the little things. I guess you really do have the makings of a triad boss.”

Please don’t make such a joke.

It was the following day when I returned home. I climbed the dark staircase, entered my own room, and fall onto my bed without switching on the lights.

It’s really tiring, and my limbs were as limp as ragcloth. I don’t want to experience having to ask Huang Hong Lei for assistance and negotiating a price with him again. I never thought I would have gotten him to agree. “Might not be a bad idea to have you owe me a favor.” I couldn’t shake off those words in my ears. I got a feeling that my weakness was captured by the worst person possible.

No, what’s there to be unhappy about now? I had to do what I had to do.

After my effort, I lifted my limp hands, and shoved my body off the bed. I switched on the lights, and went to the computer at the table.

I made the plunge. I borrowed money and gambled everything on this. There’s no turning back. I would have to rely on my own memory, and I had to squeeze out everything in my brain cells.

Suddenly, I recalled the words Shionji Keiichi said, rummaged through the CD rack, and fished out a Mr. BIG album. The 80s American Rock beats really help with computer work, huh?

Right, let's give it a try. I shuffled the CD into the disk deck, adjusted the volume, and began to play. The barking of a dog was followed by an intense, rising and falling guitar riff as the decibels rocked a fiery rhythm that tore at the soul.

‘Colorado Bulldog’.

That's the song connecting Alice and me.

Surely this bond hasn't been severed. I can only believe and pull her towards me.

CHAPTER SIX

Major's most dangerous mission was to be done the day before the operation. Our plan would have been leaked if I appeared at the enemy camp, since I had shown my face before, so I could only wait at 'Ramen Hanamaru' for Major to report in.

At the evening, Major finally returned with much vigor, dressed in rare millet-colored work clothes,

"Good win, good win! 25 seconds is too long for me. Go see the video yourself."

"I'll go have a look."

I received the Major SD card from Major, inserted it into the laptop, and watched the video.

Shown on the screen was the surveillance office building Aster Tataricus was located. As it was a direct feed from a digital camera processed to a surveillance monitor, the footage was extremely poor in quality. Nevertheless, one could still see movements inside the elevator.

The elevator opened at the first level, and a male transportant moved in some cargo that was taller at him. The elevator doors closed, and started to rise. It took about 25 seconds to reach the 12th level. Once the doors opened, the transporter pushed the cargo in.

Major himself was not captured on film in any way.

"...Did you really do this at this moment?"

I asked incredulously.

“I just opened the panel and adjusted a few parts.”

I sighed. That skill could only be described as god-like. Major took action while the cargo created a blind spot in the video. However, that transporter didn't act unnaturally at all, and Major didn't show up as he was small. The disguise was perfect.

“One other thing. I installed some ropes at the roof

“Eh?”

Ropes?

“Isn't there a large window in the target's room? If we can film the room from the outside, there's a failsafe even if the operation fails.”

“E-erm...wait a moment. From outside the window? Like hanging a rope from the roof like the building cleaners hanging outside?”

“Right. I always wanted to be Spiderman!”

“I-isn't this...too dangerous?”

I was commenting as an ordinary person, but Major went on a long tangent on how descending training is so strict, that he hung on for hours, and that the rope he developed was light and sturdy. In the end, I could only give up on trying to convince him.

“I get it. I'll let you do whatever you want...”

Once the sun, Tetsu-senpai, Hiro and Yondaime were all gathered, and we could begin meeting. Before that, Ayaka served dinner to everyone, and asked a careless question,

“Fujishima-kun, are you done with your spring assignments?”

“...Eh?”

That was all I could only answer. I hurriedly checked the calendar on my phone, and found that the following day would be the last day of spring vacation. Spring assignments, well, I did a little beforehand, but I had long forgotten about its existence thereafter.

“That’s perfect, Narumi. This is the perfect chance to dropout right now.”

Tetsu-senpai patted me on the shoulder, saying this.

“Submitting a report relating to fraud and blackmail should do the trick.”

Major continued with the sarcastic words.

“How haven’t you dropped out already?”

And most hurtful of all was Yondaime, who clearly didn’t sound like he was joking.

“Actually I love to finish everything on the last day of vacation! Once everything’s settled tomorrow, let’s get to work together!”

Ayaka said, tapped me on the head with the tray, and returned to the kitchen.

Hiro snickered,

“For assignments, can’t you not get Alice to finish it for you? She owes you a huge favor, and an assignment’s nothing much, right?”

We laughed at ourselves, picked up our bowls, and slurped away at the noodles.

Everything’s going to end soon. We’re going to get back our daily lives with our own hands, the life with Alice accompanying us.

Five empty bowls were stacked together, and our final strategic meeting began.

“The doctor dropped by again.” Tetsu-senpai started with the report, “But we don’t know which floor he went to. The elevator stopped at the 14th floor, but that might be the doctor going to greet. The 14th, 15th and 16th floor are all leased by Aster Tatarius, and Alice might be at one of the three levels. He knows that we’re looking for Alice, and maybe she’s hidden in a different level.”

“If there’s a girl to be hidden in the company, that will require hiding her from all the staff members. It’ll be really difficult, so I guess she’s at a different level.” Hiro too nodded in agreement.

“Looks like we can only split up and look around everywhere. We’ll react accordingly if things crop up.” Saying that, Yondaime started writing the number of people on the blueprint of the office building. I’ll just defer fully to the leader of Hirasaka-gumi here.

“Ah, right. When I went out on my mission today, I found a few suspicious people.”

Major suddenly chimed in,

“They look very fierce, and there were loads of them on every level. They’e also been going around checking for trap doors and such. Really suspicious.”

Seriously, is it really convincing coming from the already stealthy Major? Major? He said he took a photo, and showed me his digital camera.

The few men on the screen seemed familiar. I recalled back a moment, “Ah”, and ended up attracting attention from the others.

“You met them?” I nodded as I answered Yondaime.

“At the hospital parking lots. They had their cars parking

there...”

Since they didn’t attend the meeting, that meant that they weren’t Shionjis, working for them. If they’re showing up then, surely it has to do with Alice. Shionji Keiichi did say that his grandfather, Shionji Mikitsugu, intended to deal with Alice.

“So the old man nearly had the inheritance taken away, is feeling really anxious, and wants to find Alice now? Why’s he messing things up at such a crucial moment ...”

Tetsu-senpai ruffled his short hair messily.

“These guys...might be in the same line of work as me.”

Yondaime glared at the screen, muttering,

“Shady work?” Major enlarged the visual of the camera, focusing on their ferocious faces.

“Yeah. You said they went to the hospital too. There’s no way these guys are just chauffeurs. The Shionjis hiring them probably aren’t any decent either.”

Suddenly, I had an idea.

Even if that incident did not happen, Alice’s father might have been murdered, right before the Head Mitsutoshi. These people showed up at the hospital that day, probably so that Mikitsugu could take the inheritance for himself.

I discarded the chilling thoughts for a moment, and said,

“We don’t know what will happen tomorrow. Please get everyone in Hirasaka-gumi to see this photo.”

Yondaime nodded, pulled the SD card from the digital camera, and slipped it into his pocket.

While we were going through the itinerary for the next day, Xiao Ling-san gave me a call.

“We’ve just finished here. Do you want to come by to have a look?”

“No. I want to go over right now, but there’s a chance he might notice.”

“Got it. Am I to send the invoice to Hirasaka-gumi?”

“Yes, thank you very much.” Once the call ended, I exhaled in the dark, cramped space.

“Speaking of which, this setup of yours is way too much. That’s the most amount of money you’re splurging here, right?” Tetsu-senpai complained.

“This concerns Alice’s life. The money isn’t much compared to that.”

“I’m the one paying. If you want to act cool, wait till everything else is over.”

Yondaime’s reproach left Hiro chuckling.



The following day—

It was 9am, and I exited the subway station, looking around at the streets of East Shinjuku that was still in slumber. No matter where I looked, there were only office buildings, apartments, and construction trucks, a plain, lifeless scene.

I turned my head around, and looked up at the massive buildings behind me. The brown walls formed out of jigsaw blocks was extended far into the sky. That was our battlefield for the day.

I had already memorized the layout completely, but I gingerly frisked the layout I had looked at for an umpteenth time, and looked at it over and over again. There's no problem. If things go as planned, everything will end well.

Major's voice reached me through the earphones.

"Final checks are complete. Everything is normal."

"Right...are the ropes OK?"

"Of course. Beginning descent. During this operation, please clal me Spiderman."

What in the world? Be serious. At this voice, Hiro interrupted.

"Target car is approaching your position."

"Copy that, begin operation."

"Be careful." "We'll meet again at Yasukuni!"

I went from the stairs to the pedestrian pathway, and there was a large white Benz turning towards the basement parking lots. I hurried along, and ran down the slope.

It seemed Shionji Keiichi had already noticed me, for he was leaning by the door of his parked car, waiting for me.

"Good morning."

I felt that it was pretentious, but I did lower my head. He removed his headphones, slung them around his neck, and stuffed the car keys into the pocket of his white robe.

"Is there something?"

There was no kindness in his words, but it didn't seem that I ruined his mood. In any case, I really wondered if this guy really

has any ‘emotions’. Will my strategy really work against such a weird person? My heart raced. Calm down. I can’t let him know that this is a gamble on my part.

“I want to talk to you about Alice.”

I said calmly,

“Can we talk in your office?”

“Over here will do.”

I gulped. It’s nothing, just an expected answer. I can’t let myself be led astray by him.

It has to be in your office. I can’t show my cards now, and most importantly, I need you to log in to confirm the intel I give you, or we can’t negotiate.”

Saying that, I forced myself to glare at Shionji Keiichi’s face. I couldn’t lose to him in terms of willpower at least. The glasses lens reflected the sunlight, turning white.

“Fine.” Shionji Keiichi nodded, and strode off to the glass doors by the parking lines. He probably wouldn’t believe all of what I say, just that it’s pointless to maintain a deadlock here, and that it’s better to be certain if what I say is true. The risk of me entering his office probably is insignificant to him.

So I entered the elevator along with him, and watched the number on the electronic display panel rise, my heart racing away without restraint. If I fail here, the losses will be no less than devastating, at least

“About Alice——”

My parched tongue was sticking to my mouth, and I stammered. I coughed, and repeated,

“How’s Alice right now?”

“Do relax.” Shionji Keiichi stared at the elevator door, answering, “She should have enough strength to move on her own and use the computer.”

I felt numb. He could nonchalantly say something that basically means she won’t be able to do so soon.

The level 14 was shown and announced, and the doors were opened. Once Shionji Keiichi entered, he took the access pass and scanned it. The glass doors with the purple ‘Aster Tataricus’ logo slid aside silently.

“Morning, chairman.”

The young lady who visited me the last time appeared on the corridor, and her face frozen once she saw me.

“I’ll bring him into the chairman room. Don’t disturb us.”

Shionji Keiichi coldly stated, and the lady bowed sheepishly.

We went down the long corridor, and entered the chairman’s room. As usual, I didn’t see anyone around. Shionji Keiichi tapped his pass on the bell to the chairman’s room, and I, so tense that I was about to collapse, felt prayerful as I followed him into the room.

Like usual, there was a purple carpet laid out on the floor, along with a purple white office desk leaning by the side of the window. Three monitors were facing away from me.

“I shall hear what you have to say then. Keep it brief.”

Shionji Keiichi turned around before the table.

I nodded, and approached him one step at a time, took out the tablet from the pocket of my jacket, started it up, and handed it

over to him. Shown on the monitor was the homepage of ZODIAC, and I pointed out a certain important news.

Shionji Keiichi's sharp and thin brows curled into a frown, the eyes behind his glasses looking back and forth twice between the monitor and my face. This was written,

"it's suspected that the Aster Tataricus account details have been leaked".

Shionji Keiichi reached his hands to tap at the monitor, quickly scanned for the reports, and glared at me.

"If that is to happen, I should have received information before the news aired."

Everything following this would determine the outcome, so I convinced myself as I said,

"You wouldn't have received any information. This report was released by a leaker just now."

In the blink of an eye, Shionji Keiichi took out his little tablet from the pocket of his robe, and logged into the homepage of ZODIAC to see it was real. It's an expected reaction, since he suspected that I fabricated this webpage.

He took a step towards me, saying,

"...You know the boss of ZODIAC. It's not impossible for her to publish fake news for you, right?"

So he knows that too. I felt a creaking chill in my stomach. Each and every move was read through by him and neutralized. It's not over though. There's a lot more after this.

"It's fine if you want to suspect me, the damages will only spread. What I want to say is simple. We've hacked through your company's systems, and your important intel is being leaked. If

you want us to stop, let Alice go and tell me where she is.”

Shionji Keiichi continued to work at the computer quickly at an alarmingly rate. Most like, he was searching through the internet for related news, but that’s probably unable to help him figure out this plan completely. Soon after, he slotted the computer into his pocket, went around the table, and said,

“Without Yuuko, you probably don’t have that level of expertise.”

Is he still trying to probe me? Where’s this callousness coming from? I did my best to kick my anxiety back into my lungs, and answered,

“Since you do know that I know the boss of ZODIAC, you still have the time to suspect me?”

I might be overacting. Our eyes met. Shionji Keiichi was the first to look away, down at the keyboard at his hand.

“...You’re trying to get me to log in and check on the damages, right?”

Shionji Keiichi muttered, digging a hole of despair behind my head. So vicious his words were that I was left completely reeling. This guy’s the toughest antagonist to deal with. He continued to work at the monitor by the turn, and the wall behind the table started to darken. He let down the curtains.

“You’re planning to use a telescopic visual from the outside of the window, or a camera you brought into this room secretly, hoping to film me entering my password, right?”

At that moment, the lights were gathered on my ‘stage’. My face tensed up, my eyes slightly widened, the words stuck in my throat.

He saw through everything. Game over.

I realized that I was looking completely dejected, that I appeared to have lost completely. It's all an act performed to me.

Right, you closing the window ruined one of my pieces, Major's dangerous movie-like stunt. That's just a failsafe however. What's going to kill you will come later.

Shionji Keiichi continued to mutter,

“This isn't a bad idea, but my computer requires a fingerprint identification along with a password to log in. Just filming my fingers is not going to work. For safety reason, I had the shades pulled down too.”

After typing away, his fingers slid past the fingerprint identification by the side of the keyboard.

At that moment, I seemed to have heard a strange sound.

There seemed to be countless ancient gears assembled together in a complex manner, meshed and yet rotting away as they remained inactive. The gears started to click, and spin. The screeching of my bones, my maddening pulse, and the pain in my teeth seemed to be caused by this extreme tension. However, they seemed to distant, for something big seemed to be rumbling away.

Shionji Keiichi lifted his eyes.

I tried to scan for any emotion on his face, but I found nothing. Did I fail? My consciousness nearly fell into the darkness, but what drew me back was the reflection of the monitor on his glasses. .

The screen was completely blue. The computer was disconnected

“...This—”

Shionji Keiichi muttered monotonously, as flat as a nanosized metal chip.

“This isn’t my computer...right?”

I nodded, and gulp. The burning sensation inside the throat had spread to the back of the ears. I could no longer suppress my heartbeat, and my fingertips were trembling so much, they were numb.

“Doing that is simple. Alice’s monitor and keyboard are the same as yours.”

My voice was cracking due to the dryness.

“You swapped it? How did you do it? Did you sneak into this room? Your level of expertise shouldn’t allow for you to break the lock and the security system.”

Right, at this point, we can’t do it, or we would have broken the door and security system down to rescue Alice. It’s because we had no such power than we created this laughable, ridiculous bluff.

“I did switch things around, not just the computer though.”

Shionji Keiichi narrowed an eye skeptically. I bit onto my trembling lips, barely shook off the tension through the pain, and continued on,

“It was your mistake to cover the windows directly. If you had it open, you could have realized before you logged in.”

His hand reached for the edge of the table, and he pressed a button to pull up the curtains, the sun shining in thereafter. The skyscrapers in the heart of Shinjuku cut through the clouds from the ground, standing tall outside the windows.

I went around the table, and approached the window,

“This is a little different from the usual scenery you see, right?”

I pointed beyond the thick glass wall, saying this. Shionji Keiichi turned his head around. Finally, I saw a surprised look on his face. The eyes beneath his glasses widened slightly, albeit so little it was almost impossible to see.

“I swapped out the entire level.”

I didn’t know if it was Shionji Keiichi who gasped, or me for gasping away every time I spoke.

“This isn’t the 14th level, but the 12th, ZODIAC Electronics. The layout is the same, so the entire yesterday was spent modifying the level to mimick your office. The hardest part however is to modify the elevator and the circuit board, and also to get that staff member of yours to help us”

Shionji Keiichi did actually press the button to the 14th floor, and the display did show the 14th floor. The circuit board Major rewired merely caused the elevator to operate differently, and brought him to the 10th floor.

The last, most important part was Hiro conquering the female staff member of Aster Tataricus. Hiro did say that he shied away from the lifestyle of a gigolo, and basically intimidated her. She did listen to our request however, and waited for the chairman at the 12th level, attending to him as though she was at her actual company.

Shionji Keiichi removed his glasses, and laid them on the table. That might be the most exaggerated gesture he had ever done, but his expression remained unmoved.

“Now you understand, right? The password and fingerprint you entered were duplicates prepared by us. The report of the leak was really fabricated by me, but it just turned real. With your password and fingerprint, we’re able to hack into the Aster Tatar-

icus system through the real computer in your office.”

Shionji Keiichi let out a long sigh that landed upon the fake keyboard.

“That password can only be logged into my usual work computer. You can’t really do as you please in my company’s internal system as you wish given your level of expertise, right?”

The dry breath formed several cracks in my windpipe.

Right, we don’t have that sort of power. This is ‘all’ we can do for our operation, but—

“We didn’t have to do anything ourselves.”

My voice was as feeble as wilted grass.

“There’s one person in this building capable of doing this, right?”

A crack appeared on Shionji Keiichi’s stoic face. Enduring this anguish, I continued,

“You’re saying that she’s not leaving your cage because she’s unwilling to, right? I don’t think so. Since you did give her an avenue to connect to your network, she’s definitely still fighting right now, watching over all the networks connected to this facility, looking for the gaps in the wall. She’s the kind of person to never give up her pride, even if she has to give up her life.”

My final line was practically devoured by the heat stuck in my throat. I knew, more than anyone else, that no matter how feisty I tried to say, I dared not to affirm if it was just a wish, or a prayer. We mobilized lots of funds and manpower for this operation, but the most crucial point rested upon her, whom we couldn’t hope to contact.

But at this moment, I could practically see her slender fingers

racing away on the keyboard like raindrops. The binaries kept changing in the billions as she tried to break through the firewall, cutting through the clouds cluttering the skies, reaching the satellites, and looking down upon the surface, filling each and every void.

The cellphone in my pocket started to vibrate. The roar of the guitars, bass and drums rocked at my ears, the blaring fireworks storming at my feet.

‘Colorado Bulldog’.

I held my breath, intoxicated as I listened to the maddening, repeating melody that scratched at my skin.

We were connected by this song.

I then brought the cellphone in my hand to my ear.

“...You...idiot.”

The nostalgic voice was full of tears.

“Didn’t I tell you to leave me alone?”

The air was filled with an electric sensation, causing me to lift my head, and I saw Alice’s face appear on the three monitors. She was dressed in a blue dress, her cheeks a little thinner, her skin eerily white, her moist eyes on the verge of breaking into thousands of droplets.

I couldn’t make a voice, and squeezed out all the air in my lungs, but that too ended up sounding dumb,

“...It’s been a while. You’re a lot skinner.”

“I’m no longer your detective!”

“But no matter what you say, I’m always your assistant.”

“...listen, as a detective, I’m always working to serve the living. No matter how unbearable and ugly the truth is, the living has to live accept it, make the decision, suffer over it, and continue to live on. That has been what I’ve been saying all this while ...”

The sparkling little drops formed a little trail down her cheeks,

“B-but! After seeing my father like that, I couldn’t maintain my resolve and speak for the dead! Being a detective is everything to me, but I have no right to do so!”

So what? So I thought I as I gripped the cellphone with my trembling hand. There’s no need for any right to continue living. Worms aren’t scared of the dark. Penguins aren’t ashamed of being unable to fly. Didn’t you say that before?

“...So you want to kill off the Alice in my heart too?”

What I said next was completely emotional, without thought. There should be a more rational, logical way of expressing myself, but I could no longer hold back the riveting sensation within my body.

“But Alice, aren’t you still alive? N-no matter how much you are suffering...you have to accept it, suffer some pain, and make your decision. You’re still alive!”

The tears muddled Alice’s face on the monitor. Or maybe the muddled ones were my eyes.

“...Seriously, you—”

Her voice was weakening, shattering. The cruelty of survival shattered her little body, revealing the heart kinder than anyone else.

But Alice, no matter how you try to manipulate your words, I

won't be fooled by you. You've received my signal, unlocked the chains, and called for me through the fated song, so you lost. You defeated yourself through your omnipotent eyes, ears, and fingers.

Thus,

“Enough with the nonsense and open the back door. You're hungry, aren't you?”

Ugh. Alice swallowed her words, and sniveled twice, rubbing an eye with her palm. A red tinge appeared on her cheeks, and they were proof that she remained alive.

“...Seriously...you're always like this!”

The reddened eyes showed new tears again.

“You never listen to me. You're always so reckless!”

She removed the headset off, and threw it at the camera.

“Enough! Your folly gets worse without me throwing empty cans at you all the time!”

Alice's hand reached towards me, and I could feel energy in my body flowing freely, the fleeting tapping at the keyboard fizzing away/

Soon after, the little door behind her on the monitor slid open.

The heat in my body was about to burst out like a dam, rising out of my throat. I was about to turn and leave the Chairman's room, but I turned back to the computer again, for I forgot to ask where Alice's room is.

“I'll go get you. Which floor is that—”

Shionji Keiichi's shout suddenly interrupted,

“No, close the doors!”

Stunned, I turned my head around. Alice didn't hear, for she had already stood up and left the microphone before the computer, stumbling towards the door.

“Didn't I say that my grandfather wants Alice——”

I didn't hear the end, for when Alice stepped beyond the opened door, a large hunk dressed in a black suit so happened to appear on the corridor. Alice's shriek reached my ears. She wanted to retreat to the room, only for the man to grab her arm violently.

“Alice?”

That man was one of those I met at the hospital parking lots, and appeared in Major's photo. So they located Alice's before us? Shionji Keiichi shoved me aside, and tapped at the keyboard. The left monitor showed words on the screen, and the commands he entered raced towards the right. The other two monitors showed the man at the door, trying to pull Alice, only to let go due to the pain. It so happened that the door was suddenly slammed on him, clamping on his shoulder. Thinking back about it, I realized it was because Shionji Keiichi exhibited a godlike skill. Within a matter of seconds, he hacked into the building's security system through the fake computer, removed the safety features of the doors, and shut the doors. However, I did not have the time to think about that. Also shown on the monitors was Alice's little body that helped her out, and she tumbled onto the corridor.

“She's on the tenth floor, hurry!”

Shionji Keiichi yelled. I immediately bolted out and contacted Yondaime by phone.

“Found Alice, she's on the tenth floor! Those guys are here!!”

The tenth floor was beyond our allocated positions, so I should probably arrive them first. I didn't have the time to wait for the elevator, so I darted into the emergency staircases, descended two levels, hastily opened the metal door, and entered the building again. The corridors on this unleased level was dim, the stench of new paint and materials stinging at my skin. I could hear some soft footsteps.

“Alice!”

I yelled, sprinting down the carpeted corridor.

I nearly collided with the petite body in blue around the corner. Both of us stumbled, tripping over. I barely managed remain upright, for my back was on the wall, but she ended up falling on her backside.

Our eyes met.

“Ah...”

We exclaimed in unison.

Beneath the messy black hair were Alice's dark blue eyes, sparkling with light. Our eyes met, along with the countless emotions we had. However, we had no chance to talk, for there were frantic footsteps, along with silhouettes gaining on us.

And I immediately lifted Alice up.

“—Narumi?”

I ignored Alice's shriek as I ran the other way. While passing through a corner, I pulled a mop out from the cleaners, shoved the emergency exit, and went out. The sudden brightness dazed my eyes, but I gently dropped Alice to the floor, spun around, and stuck the mop beneath the handle, using the railing as support.

Once I let go, someone started banging at the door on the other side, twisting the handle, and bending the mop greatly. The doors rattled, and behind them, there was a heinous man cursing away. While I thought they had given up on banging the door down—

“—The emergency stairs! He’s on the emergency stairs, going from the outside!”

Damn it! He’s calling for help!

I dropped Alice on my shoulder, and shocked her so much she was flailing and screaming about. “I’ll run on my own!” Shut up and stop moving. You can’t even walk straight. The deafening footsteps upstairs got my stomach tied in a knot.

“Found her!” “The brat’s there too!”

The voices of many men came down upon me, and I started jumping three steps at a time. Should I find a floor to seek aid, or should I continue to run to the ground floor? This hesitation caused me to slow down.

At the stairwell, the metal doors to the 9th level opened, and I stopped. Men in dark suits entered the emergency staircase, one at a time. They lifted their heads, and saw Alice and me, shrugging away. Despair caused my consciousness to fade.

“Who’s that brat?” “The one that day.” “Met him at the hospital.”

I could sense the men sneering away, and glaring at me.

“Do we deal with him?” “He knows too much.”

I felt a chill in my heart, the hand on the railing shivering.

“No.” There was a voice upstairs, curshing my frozen consciousness. “He’s an ordinary person who brought friends. We can’t finish them all. Just deal with the lady alone.”

Alice's fingernails sank deep into my shoulders. Ahh, these guys are really planning to kill Alice. If they're saying that they can deal with her, that means they're going to eliminate those within the Shionjis.

"Don't you dare touch Narumi!"

Alice yelled with a parched voice,

"I-I'll come along with you then!"

She wanted to hop off from my shoulders, but my hands remained latched onto her waist, and I exerted strength. If I let go, our efforts will be for naught, right?

"Narumi, let go of me!"

There were footsteps approaching from both above and below me, and my blood was churning away in my ears. I'm not letting go, no matter what you say. Do you know how many favors I owe just to get into this point? How many times I had to change my feeble assumptions and guesses, and bluffed my eye to risk this gamble? I leaned towards the railing, and exerted strength into my feet.

Suddenly, there was **that thing** in a corner of my eye.

So I held my breath, listening intently on our overlapping heartbeats. Within me, a question was posed to myself.

Can I do it?

I kicked aside this question along with the reality. It's not a question of whether I can do it. I have to do it.

"Hang on, Alice. Don't let go."

"Wha—"

Alice was left speechless. The men closing in too looked dumbfounded, their footsteps hastening. My feet were on the railing, and I lifted Alice along.

Alice was grabbing me tightly on the, her eyes blurred due to fear. The memory buried deep within her heart was being broken up, about to swallow her. You're right, Alice, I'm going to do the same thing your father did, recklessness, stupid, barbaric dangerous, a very risky, suicide idea.

But there was something a little different. I'm not alone. I still have my friends.

I stepped onto the railing.

The cold air immediately engulfed me. The walls of the building filled my vision closing in at an alarming rate. At this moment, I can clearly feel the warmth of Alice's body. The fear and wind pressure sliced at my ears, and my consciousness was about to be robbed away from my body, abandoned far behind me.

No, I can't pass out here. I need to grab on.

So I reached my hands out, trying to grab my fading consciousness—

And the rope that actually existed.

My palms instantly felt heat so unimaginably strong. My arms, neck, shoulders and back were exerted fully, aching away. My joints and muscles were screaming away. Alice's arms were sinking deep into my neck, causing me difficulty in breathing. A nauseous heat engulfed me from head to me, burning me. I grabbed onto the bloodied rope with all my might, and latched my legs on. The rope dangled greatly, and I slammed into the wall a few times

“—Vice Admiral Fujishima!”

Once the shaking stopped, I heard a growl from behind.

“Wha-what are you doing? You wanna die!?”

Even with the strong gales blowing away, Major’s voice clearly reached my ears. I gnawed awa at my pain and fear, and glanced down even though I knew I shouldn’t. The end of the rope was touching the ground far below me, and Major was as small as a bean. Suddenly, I felt a shiver, as though my entire lower half was gone. I hurriedly concentrated, gathered my strength, and stepped onto the wall, trying to stabilize myself, glancing at the disturbing voices. The men in dark suits were lined up at the railing of the emergency staircase, only to be blocked at the emergency doors by several hunks. It’s the black T-shirts of the Hirasaka-gumi. I closed my eyes, experiencing the pain all over my body, and checked if my limbs were still able to me. “One step at a time, move back slowly! Rest when there’s a ledge on the wall” Major’s inaudible roar kept going. Alice’s teeth were clattering at my ears. All these sounds however, were practically concealed by my heartbeat.

I can do this. I have to. I concentrated fully on Alice’s warmth, and my limbs. Slowly, descend slowly. Nice and slowly—

The moment my feet landed, I relaxed, and collapsed, nearly crushed by Alice’s weight.

“Vice Admiral! Get up! We’re moving!”

Major shouted at my ear. I lifted my head in a huff, and before I could say anything, a hand was tucked right under my armpit, lifting me up violently.

“Major, take Alice and go.” Yondaime’s sidelong face was next to me. My wilting body suddenly accelerated, and my vision was bouncing back and forth between Yondaime’s back and the concrete floor. It seemed he carried me up, so I thought in a daze.

I forgot everything that had happened after Alice and I were shoved into the back of Yondaime's car. I was completely groggy, my flesh bloodied due to the rope burns, causing red drops on Alice's blue dress. She too was crying away, her little fists slamming at my chest.

“You idiot! Really...you're this reckless...every time ...”

The damp grumbling then fell upon me.

I grabbed Alice's wrist, and she shivered, before she bawled out loud, her face buried beneath my chin. Her sobs, her heart-beat and her warmth reached me.

That's proof that she's still alive.

This is enough. It's great that she's back alive. This is enough

The acceleration shoved my body onto the seat, crushing my consciousness and flattening them into fragments as I slowly sank into darkness.

My left arm was wrapped around the back of the suit, and once I saw that Alice was really there for the last time, I closed my eyes, and let sleep take over my consciousness.

✱

Before knowing it, the sakura trees showed some green.

I started my third year of high school with a glorious record of taking absence from school for two days. On the day of the school opening, my muscles were bruised and aching, and I spent the entire day lying on the bed, unable to get up. The next day, my legs were still weak, and I couldn't take a few steps.

And so, Ayaka ended up delivering all the information and lec-

tures given by the school to my house.

“Speaking of which, it’s the first time I entered your room, Fujishima-kun.”

Ayaka, still dressed in uniform, entered my room, and scanned my plain room enthusiastically. It’s her first time here?

“And you can’t write your assignments after all.” Ayaka saw my bandaged hands, smiling.

“Erm, yeah...sorry.”

“Our classmates were asking why you’re taking leave. I really couldn’t lie my way out of it, but I couldn’t tell them everything, so I told them you got involved with a hostess from Ginza, and was really injured.”

“You’re really killing my desire to go to school...”

Why mention only these provocative lines? Enough with that.

"Oh yeah, the future aspirations survey! You need to submit this tomorrow. The teacher wants me to get you to finish this."

Ayaka pulled out a sheet of paper from the stack.

"Aspirations...I need to write three? Ugh..."

I'm in no mood to think about the future. Every case had me running everywhere, worn out, battered and lethargic.

"Oh yes, you can't really write. How about NEET detective gang? Or just NEET will do?"

“Why give me two options?”

“But you’re not thinking of continuing your studies or look for a job, right?”

“Don't presume on your own, okay!? Even though I haven't really thought about it!”

“But if you write Hirasaka-gumi, won't people misunderstand that you're joining the yakuza?”

That's no misunderstanding already, okay?

“Ahh, well, I just want to think this through a little before writing on my own.”

I asked about Ayaka's future plans, and I never thought that (though I had to apologize to her) she actually named her preferred university and faculty, and I really felt that I was far behind her.

“I want to work in an IT company to do marketing work. There are many around me who can teach me.”

Ayaka's so hardworking, and can succeed anywhere.

Later, she discussed lots of school stuff with me. Once done, she sat at my chair by the desk, and stared at the blooming cherry blossom tree outside the window.

“...How's Alice doing now?”

I pretended to have just thought of it, and asked.

“Hm~”

Ayaka showed a little smirk, watched the black sakura tree branches, and answered,

“She's at the doctor Yondaime knows, and still can't eat. She's relying on a drip now. I heard that she demanded for Dr. Pepper from the nurse, and she got scolded.”

“I see...great.”

Really great. That's all I thought. Back then, Alice chose death. If she didn't have a change of heart, our actions would be for naught. Really, thank goodness. I reached my legs out on the beg, and heaved a large sigh.

"I visited her yesterday..." Ayaka grumbled, "But she wouldn't tell me anything. She ended up asking me lots of things instead."

I silently looked down at the bandages on my arms.

"So I'm guessing you probably won't tell me."

I didn't know how to explain, and didn't dare to look at Ayaka's face.

"I'll tell you once it's all over."

I could only say such empty words.

But Ayaka turned around with a smile,

"I see...so, it's still not over?"

I nodded. There's still one thing I had to do.

The detective's job.

✱

It was the following Monday when Alice returned to the detective agency. Right after school, I went straight for 'Ramen Hanamaru', parked my bicycle at the back door, greet Min-san, and went up the emergency stairs.. I opened the door, and found her changing her clothes.

"Ah——"

Alice was dressed only in her undergarments, and her long

socks were partially on. She went beetroot, and shrivelled.

“Right...sorry.”

“Don’t you know how to press the doorbell!?”

I gaudily closed the door, and I heard sharp clashes of empty cans hitting the door. With my back resting on the door, I took a deep breath, and reflected on this moment. Alice had not been around the past few days, and I got used to entering the agency without knocking. It’s my fault. My fault.

After fifteen minutes, I pressed the doorbell, and the blue light flickered in a tantrum.

“Seriously. How is it that after leaving for a few days, you forgot all basic manners? The learning ability of a shape memory shirt is superior to yours!”

Alice was seething as she remained on the bed, welcoming me.

“Sorry ...”

While I appeared to be grovelling and apologizing, I was quietly relieved that I could be scolded like this again. Feeling pretty despicable, I lowered my head in a grimace, so that Alice couldn’t see it.

But even so, I quickly lifted my head, and sized up our detective.

“...Mourning clothes?”

Alice was dressed in a Black goth dress, her head adorned with a hat with a black veil that covered her eyes.

“Kei nii-sama contacted me yesterday.”

Alice said forlornly,

“Thinking about it, there are ten of these, but it’s the first time I’m using it for its intended purpose.”

“I see, you’re coming along too?”

Alice got off the bed, nodded, and held my hand.

Alice was being a mourner on this day, and not the speaker of the dead, as per the usual purpose.

“I’m just making a trip there...you’ll be the detective.”

“I know.”

Alice and I never said a single word as we took the taxi, just holding hands, watching the remains of spring passing by outside the windows. We knew that it was all coming to an end, that if we said anything, the things we couldn’t say to each other would be wilted.

Soon, the taxi arrived at the hospital, and entered the parking lot through the back door. There was a white robed man at the narrow alley leading to the courtyard. From distance, I thought a doctor was there to welcome us, but up close, I found that it was Shionji Keiichi. He maintained a stoic face, and him wearing his headphones made him look all the more condescending. Once he saw me however, he removed it, and I had a feeling he was expressing his respects his own way.

“Yuuko, how are you feeling?”

Shionji Keiichi glanced aside at me, and turned to Alice.

“Still good.” Alice shrugged, “I thought the doctors at this hospital are evil scientists treating me as a lab rat, but the doctor Yondaime introduced was worse, pushing me down on the bed and shoving food into my mouth. It’s like a goose being raised for Foie gras.”

“Great then.”

Shionji Keiichi looked displeased as he said that, and then he turned his eyes towards me.

“—You’re here to round things off, aren’t you?”

I nodded.

“I’m the detective this time...it’s unlikely that I can do it as well as Alice though.”

“You can leave Yuuko with me. I have some things to settle. The room’s on the sixth floor, first room.”

“Thanks.” I left Alice behind, and went to the building deep beyond the courtyard. To be honest, it’s weird that I could actually trust this man called Shionji Keiichi. The Shionjis might be at this hospital. I firmly believe the best option is to leave Alice with him, even though I set up an elaborate ruse on him, all to get Alice back.

It was only at the very end that I realized that he simply doted her.

I was about to pass the doors colored with stained glass, but Shionji Keiichi called me, and I turned around. He asked,

“Back then, you said you couldn’t answer my fifth question.”

Next to him, Alice tilted her head in confusion.

“This right now should be your answer, no?”

Shionji Keiichi’s fifth question.

I recalled the strange conversation I had with him on that day.

—“*“If Yuuko is to vanish from your life, what will you do?”*

I nodded, and answered,

“I’ll do this over and over again, no matter how many times.”

Shionji Keiichi too nodded back. The stoic look seemed pretty satisfied, or maybe it’s just me.

The door to the first ward room on the sixth floor remained open, and there was no blanket on the bed. The comforting wind fluttered at the windowsill, swaying the sun on the floor. Mari-san was putting in the last things into a little bag, and stopped once she noticed me, getting up from the round chair.

“...Narumi-kun”.

She called my name, and remained silent for quite a while. The look containing various emotions poured upon the chest of my T-shirt, seeping in, and spreading out.

“...You alright?”

After saying that, I realized how stupid the question was. Mari-sanchuckled. It was a façade, as she often did after I encountered her.

“I’ve been accompanying grandpa for a while. I wasn’t allowed out, but he never did anything overbearing to me.”

“I see, that’s good.”

“...I wrote in the message, he passed away last night.”

I looked towards the feet.

For Mari-san’s expression was no longer melancholic, but unnaturally white like a sheet, and I couldn’t look at her directly.

“Yuuko isn’t with you? Keiichi-san said that he contacted her.”

I pointed at the window, where the sun shone through,

“She’s talking to Keiichi-san at the courtyard.”

Mari-san approached the window, and tied the curtain up. The black hair fluttered with the wind. She really resembles Alice. So I thought as I saw her sidelong face again, and went up to her back.

At the courtyard that’s filled with lively, growing greens, there was a white clothed man and a black clothed girl walking side by side under the tree shades, forming a strange contrast. The growing green around them continued to add color for the summer, and there was the feeling of life everywhere. However, their silhouettes had me thoroughly empathizing the existence of death.

“Summer’s coming soon”

Mari-san stared at Alice, her words seeping out from the lips.

“it’s been a while since I got to work. This is bad. I should be starting with the girls fashion in May.”

“The swimsuit season is here too.”

I too stared at the courtyard, saying this,

“I have a friend who knows fashion. He said you are the model for basically all your clothing under the Marie Shion brand, but you don’t wear swimsuits.”

Mari-san lifted her eyes skeptically, her eyes scanning my face.

I gulped, and continued,

“You don’t wear swimsuits before anyone because of the caesarean section on your body, right?”

A long while passed, and she never answered.

The wind got stronger, and the curtain flapping high at the window slapped My other cheek. Why does it hurt so much? The pain and scorn of digging up corpses doesn't go to the dead, but the detective. So that's how it feels like. Alice had gritted her teeth and endured this countless times, yet this weak-willed me couldn't stand just with that little slap.

“...You found out.”

Finally, Mari-san said, looking dumbfounded,

“...I see. So, Yuuko knows about it too?”

I bit my lips, and nodded.

“In that case, then I've really done something very foolish. It was a waste of effort...did she realize after I did that foolish thing?”

I sought all I could think of to console her, but the truth in my heart were all sharp blades that could easily pry flash away on a slight touch. nothing other than to say that this is a detective's job.

“You killed your father so that your DNA won't be matched, right??”

It's really a terrible way of saying this. Whatever, let's not think about it. show bleed by the way she will bleed either way so let the blood flow out from the wounds. Just say it all out.

“If your grandpa passed away first, you and Alice will be involved in a succession crisis. There will be people wondering if you two are borne from Mitsuki-san, and they will demand for you two to do a DNA verification, Which is what you are most terrified of. I don't know if it will be carried out in the manner you feared, but you're really terrified of the possibility, and didn't

want the fact that Alice is your daughter be revealed.”

So that night, Mari-san personally killed her father Shionji Mitsuki, with whom she had a forbidden love with. She removed the artificial ventilation, and broke Alice and herself from Shionji Mitsutoshi's massive fortune.

“Of course, your motive can't possibly be that simple. Having watched your father bear that for so many years, you might have intended to release him. decided to do it because that night, Alice was present, involved in the turmoil over the Shionjis' inheritance.”

From the corner of my eye, I could see Mari-san nodded away.

“Even after seeing Alice deemed as a murderer, you couldn't say the truth. You could only say that you were in the entire time, and lie to protect her. If they knew that you killed him, they could infer the truth from the motive.”

Mari-san snivelled, and said,

“...How foolish I was...Yuuko pretended to be the murdered to protect me, did she? In other words, she had already figured it out back then ...I'm really foolish.”

I knew she wasn't looking at me, but I shook my head. No, you're only half right, Alice didn't figure it out back then.

“I've been doing dumb things since the beginning. Doing it... with dad”

Mari-san's voice was heating up, dampening.

“But I...really loved dad. I wanted him to meet mother again. When father heard that mom killed himself, he became so frail, and I too had enough. So I tried to console him...accompany him in mom's place, and then...”

The words seeping into the tears dripped upon the window sill.

Mari-san, who offered her body to her own father, got pregnant at the age of eleven. Needless to say, it was a really dangerous time to get pregnant. The Head Mitsutoshi wanted to ensure the safety of both mother and child, and the secret that father and daughter mated together, so he invested a strangely exorbitant amount into the hospital where he too conceived the forbidden child with a woman, his own little sister, helping Mari-san conceive at such a ridiculously young age. For Mitsutoshi, so obsessed with the 'Shionjis' bloodline', he ended up causing the birth of a child that shouldn't be born.

And that baby was hidden in the cage of the Shionjis just like that, growing into a girl who resembled her mother/sister Mari-san so much, and had everything except for freedom, and the name 'Yuuko'.

Again, I looked over to the petite body of Alice, standing amongst the green.

“Narumi-kun, to tell you...”

Mari-san's voice was practically scattered by her hot breath.

“Do you know why I wanted to stay by grandpa's side? I wanted to say, every day and night, that his dear Mitsuki is dead-before him, killed by me. This would be my revenge. These people killed my mother, and I will never ...never forgive them. B-but ...”

She covered her face with both hands, lamenting with utter anguish.

“But what's the point of doing such a thing...it's not like mother will return to me!”

A dead person can never revive.

Even this foolish me understood that simple and cruel truth.

But I'm not a detective, just standing in for her. I can only accompany the detective, and watch her rip apart the truth with swords of words. I'm just being a humble author flipping over to write on a new page, recording the story, fulling it, and shaping all happiness and desires.

So I'll try to bluff her.

“She'll be back.”

My reply took a long time, so long that I could see the sunlight tilting before it reached Mari-san's eyes. She lifted her head, and her deep sea eyes, that same as Alice's, burst into a faucet of tears.

“Didn't you give birth to Alice? She's you little sister. Alice's mother is basically your mother. Didn't you say you want to replace your mother? Hasn't this come true now? You gave birth to a new life. You're a mother.”

You wish to use this manner to call for your mother to enter your heart again. Now, there's a girl strolling in that brilliant green beyond the window, right? That's your answer, no?

Mari-san bit her lips furiously, and shook her head hard, the speckles of light dispersing from her eyes, vanishing into the spring breeze.

“That child shouldn't have been born.”

The pained voice seeped out of her bleeding lips.

“On the day grandpa fell ill, the doctor said that grandpa's my real grandfather, the real father to dad ...he had a child with his own sister...”

I watched Mari-san's face sink into the shadows. I knew that,

but at that moment, I didn't know what to say to her.

“The doctor wanted to say...that since they're both father and son, the organ transplant won't really be rejected. Do you understand? If dad's brain dead, they should well donate an organ to grandpa. He's in his 90s, and might not last through surgery, but no matter how small the chance, they hoped the familiar will agree. They couldn't tell dad's wife about this secret, so they could only discuss this with me...”

I realized. Shionji Keiichi mentioned that when Mitsuk-san died, there was a ‘document’ in the room. Surely that proves the fatherly relationship between Shionji Mitsutoshi and Mitsuki, along with an agreement to do an organ transplant. . “Having known this, I just laughed in disbelief. This shows that our family's all the same. I ended up sleeping with dad, because of this mad bloodline of the Shionjis.”

I kept shaking my head. That's not true. Please don't think this way.

“Yuuko has that strange constitution because of my blood.”

Tears rolled down Mari-san's large eyes, sliding down her cheeks.

The blood as thick as paint created a strange plant in the darkness, a girl who wouldn't sleep, eat, or grow up, one who survived on knowledge

“Actually, grandpa did wake up once before he passed away.”

Mari-san did not wipe her tears away as she curled her lips, feeling vexed,

“It seemed he thought of me as Yuuko, and kept apologizing to me. Sorry Yuuko, asking for forgiveness, that her actual mother's actually me, that she's the pinnacle of the Shionji bloodline, the

perfect creation. That's why her wanted her to remain by his side forward, and not let her out to the outside world..."

Her trembling shook the air, and I felt it too.

The reason why Alice was confined with the Shionjis and raised there not because they wanted to hide this illegitimate child, but that an old man, obsessed with 'bloodline', deemed her as the rarest treasure of them all . "I didn't say it out. What grandpa said really disgusted me, and I felt filthy myself, for I too did the same thing as him grandpa, with my own dad. It's my fault that Alice was locked in the room and raised there."

Each word was filled with tears as they dropped, forming a puddle.

"I really don't wish for Yuuko to know this secret."

Mari-san lowered her eyes,

"When's they mentioned the DNA verification, I really panicked madly. His wife never returned to the Shionjis, and never knew of Yuuko's birth, So surely she will request to check Yuuko's DNA."

It's likely that the Shionjis already knew who Alice's biological mother was, and the ones who didn't were the 'outsiders', Shionji Kyouka who was living away, along with her relatives.

Also, there's another one, Alice herself.

"So I thought that if dad died earlier than grandpa, we will have nothing to do with the inheritance, and dad will be released from the family...but in fact...I just wanted to release myself..."

So that night, she came to Shionji Mitsuki's room, and personally removed the artificial ventilation, ending the lingering life of her father, or husband.

Maybe somewhere in her heart, she wanted to use this chance to sever the bloodline entangling her and her sister.

“Basically, the entire matter is basically just me feeling guilty over my father complex. I lured in dad through such filthy thoughts, and even bore a child...I really don't wish for Yuuko to know about this. If she does, she will surely hate me.”

I watched Mari-san abuse herself probably verbally, but couldn't help but look at my feet. I then lifted my eyes, saying,

“She doesn't hate you.”

The me reflected in Mari-san's eyes seemed to be as shrouded by the moon covered by the thin clouds.

“Alice won't hate you for this reason.”

Once again, I repeated what I said.

Not out of mercy, not to console her, but simply to say the truth.

“...Narumi-kun, it's just you.”

“It's not just me.”

I'm not a detective, and that's why I can speak for the living without hesitation.

“Alice has long figured that you're her mother, probably back when she was still with the Shionjis.”

The seas in Mari-san's eyes were dispersed by the winds. Her lips remained feeble but she eked out a brief answer,

“...You're lying.”

I shook my head.

“I’m not...the name ‘Yuuko’ was given by your father,Mitsuk-san, right?”

Despite feeling skeptical, Mari-san nodded.

“Mitsuki-san’s a fan of James Tiptree Jr. works. It’s a male name, but the person’s actually a female, and her actual name is Alice Bradley Sheldon. The name ‘Yuuko’ is derived from Alice.”

“...I never heard that. But what’s the point of saying this?”

I took a breath, and the heat and cold of the truth tore at my throat.

“Alice Sheldon’s mother is called Mary.”

I waited for the emotions to spread in the heart of the speechless Mari-san, and it seemed time had stood still for this matter. She didn’t answer, and her eyes remained teary as she did not do anything more.

“Mitsuki-san once gave Alice a set of Tiptree’s books, and this matter was written in one of the translator’s afterword. Maybe him sending Alice’s these books is him trying to hint the truth. That’s why she calls herself ‘Alice’, and that means she knows from the beginning that ‘Mary’ is her mother.The teddy bear pajamas she wears every day is also a creation of her mother.”

Again, I looked outside the window.

That petite black figure moved from the tree shadw to the sun, and was blocked by the shade ...

How can she hate you? It’s because of you that she live, walking in the green that’s entering my eyes, experiencing life, breathing, walking on her legs. You can’t see the clear truth when you’re your tears are blurring your eyes?

If that’s really case, I’m going to tell you what I really think, at

this very end.

It might sound hollow and meaningless, completely unnecessary even, but,

“Actually, Mari-san...I’m really grateful to you. It might be weird for me to say this, but ...”

Eh, why do I always break down right before the important bits? I can’t even say anything nice here.

“Because you gave birth to Alice, I got to meet her, and I had a chance to participate in her miraculous life. I’m older by a year at least, but I’m really —”

Pull yourself through. So I chided myself. If I’m going to cry here, who am I supposed to console?

“—Really, grateful. I really am. So...so...”

Please don’t say that you shouldn’t have given birth to her.

Mari-san turned her face aside, grabbed the curtain, and covered her eyes, her shoulders quivering. The scattered black hair fluttered with the , caressing the back of my hand.

So I left the window side.

Before I exited the ward room, I heard sobbing behind me, as serene and crystalline as melting snow.

I reached the courtyard, and Alice, under the tree by the building, came running out its shadow, the dress of her mourning clothes fluttering. Shionji Keichi’s stunningly white silhouette then followed suit.

“Is it over?”

“Yeah, it’s over.”

I lifted my head towards the ward building. The sixth floor windows remained open, but there was no one by the window-side, and I wondered if it was all a dream . I turned around, saw Alice being hesitant, and asked,

“Alice...you’re not going to meet her?”

Alice shook her head beneath the black veil.

“Sometimes, it’s better not to meet, I guess?.”

“I see...”

“You’ll feel uncomfortable if your parents cried next to you, right?”

I couldn’t help but laugh. She’s right. Suddenly mentioning this common occurrence brought me back to reality.

“Need me to drive you out?”Shionji Keiichi approached us, asking, “Or a taxi?”

I looked over at Alice. She was holding down the hat that was nearly blown away by the wind.

“I’ll take the train. It’s fine to walk about once in a while. The station’s not too far away.”

That’s surprising.

“Pretty rare of you to do that. What’s with you? Don’t you normally hate getting suntanned or the hot weathe —”

Alice snorted slyly,

“I’m wearing a veil and mourning clothes this time, so the sun isn’t too scary. The doctor Yondaime introduced laughed at me for having limp legs, that I can’t walk 500m. Next time, I’m walking to the hospital to prove him wrong.”

I chortled.

Alice and I walked side by side under the gentle afternoon sun, down the river walkway surrounded by the brown trees. The relieving breeze grazed our heads, and it really was good weather for strolling.

“Taking the train is just an excuse I said to Kei nii-sama.”

We kept walking until the hospital was no longer to be seen, and Alice said.

“Hm?”

“Actually, I have something I want to ask you right now.”

“...Oh, what is it?”

So it’s a conversation only the two of us can hear, you mean? What?

“Erm, in other words...”

Alice’s gloved fingertips fidgeted about.

“First of all, I’m asking this to be sure that you have thoroughly fulfilled your role as a detective.”

“Right, speak up.” What does she want to ask?

The huffing face hidden under the black veil seemed devoid of life.

“You know everything about what I did that night...didn’t you?”

“Yes, I do.”

“I-I don’t believe you. Now tell me!”

“Well, before the alarm rang at midnight, the Mari-san who came to my room was you in disguise.”

Alice lowered her hat past her eyes, her right hand fanning away.

Right, that wasn't Mari-san, but Alice disguised in Mari-san's clothes. The tables folded outside the table were simply meant to make up for her lack of height. It's really embarrassing to be fooled by such a simple trick

I never thought she could act without batting an eye. Both sisters are chip off the same block. A bit of acting, and they can bluff anyone.

“U-uuu, I thought a fool like you wouldn't have seen through it. How did you realize it?”

“Well, I realized it after thinking back about it. Back then, Mari-san...ehh, basically you in disguise did say “*Yuuko's the disciple Keiichi groomed*”, didn't you?”

The eyes beneath the veil blinked several times,

“So-so what?”

“Mari-san doesn't know that Keiichi-san often interacted with you. She said that when you were at the Shionjis, you only met her and Gorou-sensei.”

“Ahhh...”

Stunned, Alice stopped in her tracks.

“...I-I never considered this part...”

“You should have paid more attention here if you want to lie, you know?”

“Wh-what’s with that tone of yours? Why are you acting like an old senior? You’re saying that you’re much better than me at bluffing!?”

Well, I didn’t really intend for that, but it’s no wonder the listener would feel that way.

“E-erm...” The face under Alice’s veil paled. “You remember what I said when I disguised myself as nee-sama? You didn’t remember the fine details, right? Tell me you didn’t!!”

“Eh, yes, I remembered it all.”

“Why are you remembering those things!? You normally have a sieve of a head, and can’t remember more important stuff!”

I jumped backwards, avoiding the punch Alice swung at me.

“What are you being angry about? It’s because those things are important that I remember.”

“Wh-what’s important! Forget it all! Right now. Erase, everything!”

“Not at all. Anyway, Alice, you’re not done back then, right?”

“Wh-what are you saying!?”!

“You asked if I want to leave you, and I said you’re a very important partner to me.”

“Ahhhhhh!” Alice wanted to cover up my words with a scream.

“And then, you said, “*Yuuko will surely—*”, before the alarm rang.”

“Forget everything right now! I-I just asked because I wanted to fool you!!” The reddened face beneath the black veil didn’t seem so ashamed. That’s not the truth; she was so embarrassed,

her neck was rant, and she was thoroughly flustered.

“Now are you going to add on?”

“You idiot! Who’s going to!?”

Alice spun around, and stormed forward. I gave a wry smile, and caught up to her. I wasn’t moving too fast, but the difference in our strides allowed me to do so quickly.

Soon after, we continued to walk silently under the sun. There were people jogging and walking their dogs, people riding bicycles, and people wearing skates passing us by. They all gave Alice and me strange looks, but I didn’t mind.

Because I was walking alone with Alice, in such a nice weather to boot.

This might be the last chance.

A bridge appeared before us, and Alice muttered,

“...Then, you know the significance of my actions now, don’t you?”

I narrowed my eyes at the fragmented dazzling sun on the water surface to the right, answering,

“Yeah.”

“I see.”

A warm silence engulfed us once again.

What did Alice’s actions signify?

Mari-san left their bedroom saying the half-truth that she was going to get me something to eat. Alice immediately realized she was lying, and what she truly intended to do. That’s why she

changed into her sister's clothes, and visited me at my ward room on the first floor, creating an alibi for her sister.

But that's not all Alice did. She hacked into the hospital system, and probably delayed the alarm when Shionji Mitsuki's artificial ventilation was removed.

Without it, the alarm wouldn't have rang while Mari-san was still talking to me.



Also, if the alarm did function normally, the medical staff should be able to save Shionji Mitsuki's life in time.

Alice's actions delayed the time of the crime back, one reason being to cover up for Mari-san's crime, and secondly, to kill off her father who was a living corpse.

The confession Alice made in that footage wasn't a lie; it was the truth.

"I wanted to release my father, and also myself."

"I had no choice."

The younger sister realized the crime the older sister was about to do, pretended not to know anything, and fulfilled it.

It was Alice who killed him.

I knew that. That's why I remained silent, and accompanied Alice till the end of the road. My right hand and Alice's left hand just so happened to touch in unison, and they clasped together. The little warmth in my hand shivered, touching my palm as we waited at the red light. Once the traffic lights finally turned green, she and I continued forward again, to the other end as the seasons changed.

It was a spring afternoon, and while the wind is faintly dotted with tears from the distance, everything within the line of sight is so clear.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Two days later, she left me.

I had a feeling when I reached the office after school. Alice was packing up the dolls on the bed, and it shocked me.

"Hurry up and help me! Uu, it's depressing thinking about how I have to stuff so many of my friends into this small box..."

Even though Alice was somewhat teary, she stuffed the dolls, numbering more than a hundred, into the cardboard box. She asked me for help, so I could only do so. But no matter how I did it, it made her unhappy. And she continued to grumble "The back of the dolphin's bent!", "The Capybara's no different from burnt bread if you squash it like this!" "Don't put the puppy together with the monkey! They're not on good terms!"

An hour later, the packing of the cardboard boxes were finally done. There was so many of them that it filled the entire kitchen; Alice and I laid side by side on the bed. Looking at the wide white mattress, I realized that it was so big, and it was a refreshing feeling.

"What do we do with the plushies?"

I asked as I looked at Alice. The sleeves of her pajamas were black, probably because the plushies in the corner of the room were covered with some dust. She stared at the ceiling for a while, her long black hair covering the bed like spilled honey.

"I'll probably leave them to Kei nii-sama. The place I'm going to next might not be one where I can bring friends to."

These words finally forced out an unbearable heat out of my chest. No, perhaps it had been there for a while, but only recently

did I dare to admit it.

Alice reached her hand out, picking up a rectangular object the size of her palm from the gadget rack.

It was the remote control.

Her finger tapped at it, and the buzzing of the air conditioner, injecting cold air into this detective agency all year long, vanished as though it was sucked into the abyss.

It died. It was over. Such a lament surged up within me, unable to be held back.

Alice turned her face to the side, and I followed her eyes to look at the 6 security cameras on the monitor by her bed. There were two cars parked in front of the 'Hanamaru Ramen Shop'. One of them was painted black and white, while the other was a reddish orange.

Several men in trench coats could be seen getting off the cars. Min-san left the shop to talk to them.

"...Looks like nee-sama surrendered yesterday."

Alice muttered as she looked up at the ceiling.

I too nodded as I faced the ceiling.

"I never did pay heed to the laws of this country, and now I ended up like this. How laughable...but I guess I have no choice."

Without the sounds of the air conditioner phasing us out, Alice's words echoed in my chest mercilessly.

"Hey, Alice."

"What?"

"Can I say something embarrassing?"

"Is there anything you usually say that isn't embarrassing?"

I couldn't laugh. Maybe this really is the case.

"I really don't wish that you go with them."

"Idiot."

That might be the one time this detective ever told me off so lightly.

"This is the sin you chose to reveal yourself. Even if you're the replacement, it is a case you solved. No matter how much it hurts, you have to bear it. I experienced this a few times already."

I wanted to answer, but I didn't know what to say. Alice's voice melted in this thin air,

"But for me--I guess it's a little easier for me now. I have an assistant who can shoulder some of my load."

Don't say this now. I can't even look at you now.

"Narumi. If you repeat everything again while having remembered everything, will you choose a different path?"

Hearing this, I raised my hands to block the bluish-white lights, affirming,

"No."

My reply was so clear even I was taken aback by it.

"I'll definitely do the same thing."

"Yeah...me too."

I sat up, wanting to get off the bed, but my legs could not exert strength, and I sprawled back on the icy bed. Alice leaned over, sitting on the side of the bed, and this useless me couldn't lift my head to look at her.

"Alice. So many things happened till now. It feels like--"

I said as I stared at her knees in front of my eyes,

"It feels like everything was written down from the very beginning, in a certain place, and that we're following the script every day."

At this point, Alice must be looking at me with her warm, fleeting smile. Soon after, the tender voice of the girl drifted to me,

"I suppose. However, it is a story belonging to you alone. Your courage, your exploits, your failures. No matter whatever you choose, whether you engrave it on a stone tablet, so what? In any case, I feel happy that you're able to face me like this right now. What about you?"

I stared at Alice's face, but suddenly, my eyes reddened, and I couldn't lift my head.

"So, what will you do in the future?"

As for me--what will I do from now on?

I had decided.

It was the one thing worth doing.

"I'm going to write my story."

With a trembling voice, I answered,

"I'm going to write everything that had happened to this point, so that a certain me in the past is able to find its path."

This is also for the sake of allowing me to remember Alice forever.

A little hand reached out before my eyes.

Finally, I was able to lift my head. I felt that it was unfair that I was the only one crying, but I grabbed her hand.

"Now then, this is a present from the detective to the author."

Alice smiled.

"I shall name this for you. "God's Notebook" It shall be. Isn't this a sharp title?"

--In other words, it is the book you are currently holding.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Even when the story comes to an end, everyone's lives has to continue, and this God's Notebook naturally has their happenings recorded in it.

Major established a game development company, and developed a few gun shooting games that are passionately praised by a few group of players. He's enjoying himself and busy all day long, but still heartily accepted my interview. When I visited him at the office, he gleefully brandished a real gun collection at the office that's used for reference (is it really fine for him to possess them?)

Yondaime too opened a few new companies, and the most successful of them seems to be clothing mail order. It seems the secret of success came from the difference in local prices, and interviews of him can be seen in several magazines. However, he's still the same as before, occasionally coming to the 'Hanamaru Ramen Shop' and causing a drunken commotion with Tetsu-senpai and the others.

Tetsu-senpai started a 'Punching Bag Service'. Most of us hearing this for the first time would ask 'What's that?' Well, it's a job for him to settle disputes. Once customers get in trouble, they'll just need to call him for help, and he'll get there quickly to 'be the punching bag'. It seems that his job scope is a little wider than that; I guess I'll ask him about that next time. I'm guessing that most of the requests are from the Yakuza.

Most surprising of them all however is Hiro. He's married. The wedding was held at a bar managed by Yondaime, and he got all those acquainted with him to celebrate. Min-san was dressed in wedding dress, and was prettier than any bride I saw.

Right now, Hiro's dressed in that black waist-length apron, standing in the kitchen of the ramen shop. It's said that he deleted the numbers of all the women he recorded in his phone, and isn't fooling around with girls anymore. Min-san's response to this was to say "I don't mind, is he an idiot?". After a while, 'Hanamaru Ramen Shop' was described as "A mysterious ramen shop owned by a beautiful couple with delicious ice cream", becoming a little famous, with a massive boom in female customers. Right now, their ramen's delicious too, so I hope everyone can continue to praise them, I think.

Ayaka enrolled in the college Major was in. "Eh? Wait, isn't that the national university that's hard to get in?" When I asked her that, she laughed, saying "I chose a faculty that's easier". However, I'm guessing that she's just trying to be humble, and that it's the result of her working hard where I can't see. I didn't know any ordinary ordinary college students, so I often asked her for help to help me sneak into their library.

And just as everyone had predicted, I was unable to be motivated, and did not enter college. After I graduated, I did not proceed with any part-time job, and stayed around at home, doing chores for a while (in other words, a NEET). Recently, a novel I wrote in the past received a certain award, and I did manage to earn some money. The sales volume was not much, but I did continue to write. I moved into an apartment near 'Hanamaru Ramen Shop', so that my sister can get married earlier without any worries ; this was my first time living alone.

The curtains were closed as I sat in front of the computer, recalling the cases I went through in high school, and wrote them down in a draft. Suddenly, I felt that every step I took till this day was a predetermined outcome.

For a detective's assistant had decided become a novelist.

Without thinking, I stopped typing, and went back to recalling.

I met all kinds of people. Living people, dead people.

I beat up these people, I was beaten up by them; I cried for these people, I was forced to cry, and I did laugh with them. Through such landmarks, I arrived at my current position. Was that notebook as written? Or were the records jotted down by following my footsteps? Assuming that time is a loop, there would be no difference in these two, and anything goes.

Anyway, I'm here right now, writing the story of her, who left me.

At the same time, this is my story, the story of the people I relied on, and even the story of thousands of anonymous people who passed by me and vanished into the buzz of the city. Even so, from the initial meeting till the final farewell, this story remained a vast ocean, and she was nowhere to be seen.

Thus, I could only use my own fragments to write down this story, scattering them all over the world, hoping that the me on this planet will be able to find her no matter where I am on this world, no matter how far in the future it was.

"Don't you feel lonely?" Min-san once jokingly teased me as she asked,

"I guess." I answered. "It'll be a lie to say that I'm not lonely."

"Ever since you became a novelist, you're becoming wiser in whatever you say." Min-san laughed. Perhaps that's the case. I can't cry when I'm sad like a normal would, scold when I'm angry, laugh when I'm happy, and say whatever that's on my mind as per normal, and because of that, I started to write my own story.

I'm here.

Even now, I can't forget about you right now.

That was all I wanted to tell her.

The editor-in-charge from the publisher called me. "Right, I'm done with the afterword. It's fine, I'll send it over right now." After hanging up the phone, I was about save my file in a text format, before I stopped.

The smartphone basked under the window sunlight at the edge of the table vibrated.

Then, the little device started to sing. A dog's bark then summoned a guitar, a bass and the drums that formed a loud arch.

It's a nostalgic song. I never heard it ever since then, and I thought I would never hear it again. It was a song of extraordinary significance.

--'Colorado Bullbog'.

The rusted shackles within me started to grind and tug at each other, and the sealed memories within me started to barge the doors open, the wave rushing through. All kinds of images, colors and sounds, smiling and crying faces flowed into my mind vividly.

I picked up the smartphone, checked the name shown on the screen in utter disbelief, and put it at my ear.

"...Hello?"

I heard noise, chirping, laughter, and--

'--Why are you still using this ringtone now? Goodness. Haven't you switched phones thereafter? Or have you always set it up like this?'

Her voice never changed.

And mine was stuck in my chest, unable to come out.

"...Ahh..."

All my throat could only eke out was a strange voice akin to an eraser squeaking against the blackboard. I could practically see her frowning on the other end of the phone.

'What? Did you forget my voice or something?'

I looked up at the ceiling, lowered my head down to look at my knees, and then my eyes returned to the story I was typing into my PC. I'm not in a story, this is reality.

I took a deep breath, and after a lot of effort, I eked out a voice from my parched throat.

"...I can't possibly forget about that, right?"

'Thank goodness.'

She laughed on the other end of the phone.

"Hey, where are you right--"

I asked, and then, I recalled her first line. How could she possibly hear my phone's ringtone?

And so, I stood up, pulled the curtain and windows aside, and leaned my body out to look around. The grassy air drifted in, and the sun at noon shone hard on my eyes, hurting them.

Finally, I found her, dressed in a white one piece dress, standing at an empty field behind the apartment that was covered with sand and wilted grass. She put down the phone by her ear, and smiled at from under the shadow of the small straw hat.

"It has been a while."

"Alice..."

I could only call out her name.

My heart felt as there was new blood infused into it at this point, and the vitality injected all over my entire body numbed my fingertips. I was unable to say anything, and hurriedly retreated to my room, ran to the corridor, put on the sandals, rushed down the corridor, tumbled down the rusted stairs, darted past an alley, and got to the back of the apartment. Alice was still waiting for me. Again, I exerted effort in rushing to her, panting furiously.

Looking at her face from up close, I finally relaxed. She was bashfully pouting her lips, averting her eyes; it's really her.

"Wh-what is it? Why are you just looking at me without talking? Say something already."

She didn't change; really, nothing changed at all. Ever since that day--I wonder how many years passed? No matter how she appeared to be, I can't tell if there's anything different. It's a waste of time wondering how many days passed.

"...You haven't changed at all, have you?"

I accidentally blurted it. Alice went beetroot, and scowled,

"That's the first thing that comes up in your mind!?"

She took off the straw hat, and charged at me, so close that our noses were almost touching.

"Look closely. Look! I grew 6cm!"

"Ah, ahh, yeah."

Speaking of which, back then, Alice seemed to be at the height of my chest.

"I can also evolve every day, not as weak as I used to be. I can carry a 17 inch laptop around now!"

What's there to be proud about? A laptop's meant to be carried around anyway.

"I know how to ride a bicycle now."

"Heh...that's...well, that's amazing."

Alice leaned her upper body skeptically, and looked up at my face from below,

"What's with you? You've been acting strange all this while. Have you forgotten how to talk because you've been shutting yourself in the room and writing drafts for so long?"

"No, it's not really that exaggerated."

Looks like she knew that I became a novelist. I'm happy.

"...It's just that...I have too much to tell you...and I don't know where to begin with."

I honestly stated my heartfelt words, and Alice widened her eyes, before she shyly averted her eyes,

"I see...hmp. I can forgive you for that."

And then, she softly added on,

"I'm the same too."

I narrowed my eyes, and again sized up Alice from head to toe. I was worried that if I blinked, she would vanish like steam, but she did not go anymore.

"There's a lot I want to ask you, a lot I want to tell you. Maybe a thousand a one nights won't be enough for me to finish."

"Yeah, me too. But anyway--"

I held in my agitated emotions, and exhaled to vent my mood. Now's not the time to cry.

"I'm glad to have you back."

Alice turned aside, her face completely red, and so was her ears, retorting back with some teeny weeny voice I could not hear. It's fine. I understand. i have the same feelings.

"Anyway, there are some things I really have to handle right now, urgently!"

Alice suddenly howled, and shocked me so much I retreated.

"I read the novels you wrote. Ignoring the other details, your description of me and the plushies are too careless!"

You read them? Why thanks for that. No, let's not talk about Alice. The dolls are the details now?

"Didn't you write the final volume? Before you send it out to the publisher, correct everything I pointed out!"

"..Eh? How did you know--ah, you hacked into my computer?"

"That's my right of course. I'm a detective. How can you possibly remember every single detail with that mind of yours alone? Bring me to your room!"

Alice said, and grabbed my hand, dragging me along to the stairs of the apartment. My heart was filled with sweetness and bitterness.

She's a detective.

Nothing changed at all. She's back.

"Oh yeah, does your room have any air conditioning that's numbing cold, and is there a dozen of Dr Pepper in the fridge

waiting for me?"

I smiled as I hurried my steps, holding her hand.

Our shoulders side by side, we head down the first path together.

Awaiting us in front in an unknown desert with no footprint imprinted. Even if a detective were to search all over the world, she would not be able to check on the future. The only way would be to write it down with our own hands, feet, and blood. It is a flat road that would not lead far, sizzling with the heat. It is a vast blue, blue ocean with no wakes in sight. A sculpture that is yet to be dyed in truth or lie, despair, blissfulness and reality--

This is the story, of Alice and me.

A F T E R W O R D

The last two chapters in this volume were written four years ago.

There was a value convenient tool in the files, called ‘modified date’. Thanks to that, I didn’t have to think too much to know that the last modification of this 20 paper draft ‘Kamisama no Memo-chou X’ file was in 2010.

I had an interview when the short story of the fifth volume was released to the market, and when the reporter asked how this series would end, it was the first time I thought of that matter. “I don’t know which volume it will be, but if one day, I would end up writing Alice’s own story, that should be the last.” So I answered. After returning home, I reflected upon my words, and nodded to myself, thinking that yes, that was the case. So, what kind of ending it shall be...so I wondered as I tapped at the keyboard, and ended up with the last two chapters you have read (you might have to read the main story first, so I will have to apologize to the readers who are used to reading the afterword first). I copied these last two chapters almost exactly as it was from four years ago, and wrote backwards so that the plot and ending would smoothen out. It might sound like I had accomplished something great, but the outcome was strangely normal, nothing too fanciful.

There was one part I changed in the last two chapters, the phone Narumi used in the last chapter was clearly written as a ‘smartphone’. The setting in Kamimemo is in 2006, when I wrote the first volume. That was a year before Apple’s iPhone shook the world and changed the telecommunications society completely. There was no smartphone to be seen before then. A modern work has been written for a long time, and there will always be issues when the evolving modern society will differ from the work.

There are three ways to deal with this.

First: To accelerate the timeframe of the work to match reality. This will cause much changes to the plot, and isn't appropriate for all instance.

Second: To not rectify those flaws, and import modern technology and social trends into the work directly.

Third: To accept that it had deviated, and keep on writing. This was what I chose. There's a genius hacker in the story who indulges in the latest technology, yet the NEET detective gang communicate through flipphones. I often felt conflicted writing this, but I had no choice.

I remembered that when I changed the 'phone' to 'smart-phone' in the last chapter, I really felt relieved, thinking how I finally caught up to modern times.

And just like that, I finally caught up to the times. I really apologize for making the readers wait three years for 'Kamisama no Memochou'. If you wonder what I have been doing this time, the answer, as you will know, it that I have been writing other series.

'Kamisama no Memochou' takes a lot of time, as long as my career as an author, so whenever Narumi would think "It's been a year and a half since I met Alice..." I would think "It's been a year and a half..." and be really nostalgic about it. To a bystander, this might seem really disgusting.

When submitting the fifth volume, I wrote a timeline to determine the order of the various events. I thought I should finish it at this point.

- 1st year in high school, October, Angel Fix Incident (1st Volume)
- 1st year in high school, March, Two Hundred Million Laundering Incident (2nd Volume)
- 2nd year in high school, April, Sarashi Theft Incident (5th Volume, first chapter)
- 2nd year in high school, May, Wine With Impurities Incident (5th Volume, second chapter)

- 2nd year in high school, May, Gardening Club Crisis (3th Volume)
- 2nd year in high school, July, Hirasaka-gumi Conflict (4th Volume)
- 2nd year in high school, August, Prostitute Abduction Incident (5th Volume, third chapter)
- 2nd year in high school, September, Baseball Match (5th Volume, fourth chapter)
- 2nd year in high school, October, Min-sn's Wedding Commotion (6th Volume)
- 2nd year in high school, November, Gorou-sensei's visit (end of 6th Volume)
- 2nd year in high school, December, Homeless Attack incident (7th Volume)
- 2nd year in high school, January, Mahjong Parlor Incident (8th Volume, chapter 1)
- 2nd year in high school, January, Compensated Dating Violence Incident (8th Volume, chapter 2)
- 2nd year in high school, February, Continuation of the Angel Fix Incident (8th Volume, chapter 3-4)
- 2nd year in high school, March, Shionji Inheritance Commotion (9th Volume)

...A long one and a half year it has been, both for Narumi and me. I'm not writing this just to fill the pages. If you may use this chance to flip through the prior stories or buy another set of volumes, that will really be great.

Thinking back, when I wrote the first volume, I never thought of the plot, just that I gathered a few interesting characters together, and then write whatever I could think of. If I was to ask 'why did she jump', and gave a reason other than 'drugs', the story might not be centered in Tokyo. I might use the 'Ikebukuro West Gate Park' as reference, and write a mystery based in a rural village like Yokomizo Seisho did, or a horror story that happens in the suburban areas like Stephen King, or a mystery romcom involving a large school. In fact, I did write the third one (with another publisher).

Before thinking the first step forward, I was still troubled by the endless possibilities before me, and found that I was done with the last volume. I really believe I'm destined to write this, or that I'm just unloading something that has been written in the notebook a long time back, but to be honest, being a novelist is a strange profession. I feel this way no matter the work. To put it, I didn't feel that the words I wrote in the afterword of volume 8 was written by me, but that the story begged for it. Authors often

say that ‘the characters began to move by themselves’, and that’s basically it. To note, this thought only occurs after finishing and looking back at the work. It’s really a turmoil to think how the characters should act, and yet after submitting the script, I would forget all the troubles I had. Maybe it’s to convenience myself into writing the next volume. It’s said that women forget the pains of labour after give birth to avoid fear of conceiving more—the same logic might apply here.

So, it’s time to goodbye to Narumi and Alice, forget the pain of giving birth to them, and progress to the next work.

This work ends successfully due to the assistance of many. First, to think the editor in charge Yuasa-sama who supported me until the very end, Kishida Mel-sama who injected life into the characters with his pretty illustrations, mangaka Tiv-sama who’s currently collaborating on a new work with me, the various editors at Dengeki Daioh, and the numerous staff and voice actors who brought this work to a new level. I met the actor and actress who debuted as main characters, voicing Narumi and Alice^[2], and showing up with outstanding performances later; despite no effort given on my part, I still felt proud of them. Finally, to thank no one else but you, the reader of this work. I’ll like to present my utmost thanks here. It’s thanks to everyone that this is a wonderful work. Thanks to everyone.

— May 2014, Hikaru Sugii.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTES

1. ↑Full title-- Bushido: The Soul of Japan
2. ↑Narumi was voiced by Yoshitsugu Matsuoka, whom you might know of him as the voice actor of Kirito. Yui Ogura voiced Alice. Yes, these were the duo's first notable roles